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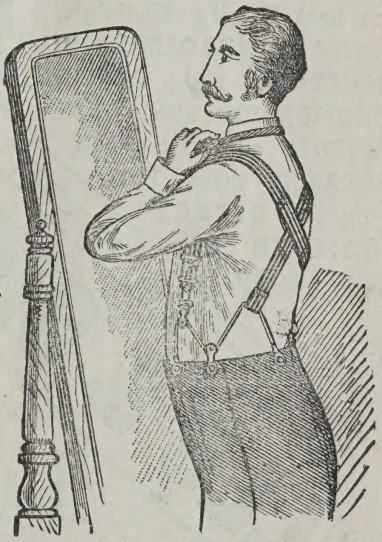

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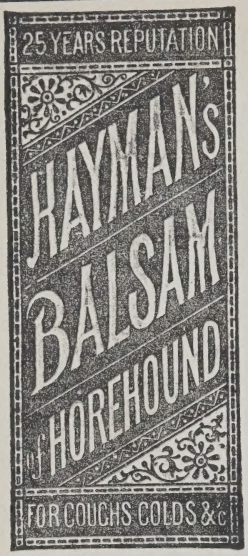

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CHAPTER I.

IN SWEET SEPTEMBER.

IT was in the sweet month of September, the soft afternoon of a day that had been hot even on the borders of the North Sea, which sends its breezes flying over the part of Essex which is not flat and marshy, but rich and undulating, and fair and pleasant to look upon. In London the people were gasping for breath, but here, though the day had been fairly hot, it was now at six o'clock soft and balmy, and by nightfall the air would be sharp and fresh.

It was such a fair day and such a fair view! Behind on the higher ground stood a rambling old house, half hall, half farmhouse—a house with a long red-brick front, and a sort of terrace-garden from which you might look across the fields and the long green stretches of land over which the bold sea

came and went at ebb and flow of the tides. It was a quaint old garden, with turf like velvet, and raised beds cut in it here and there, gay with blazing scarlet geraniums and blue lobelias, and kept neat and tidy by a quaint bordering of red tiles set edgeways into the ground. There were tall trees too about this domain, which hid the farm-buildings from sight, and also helped to shield the house from the fierce winter blasts, and in front there lay a rich and verdant meadow sloping gently down to the high-road, where just then a man and a young girl had stopped for a moment as they walked along together.

"Mayn't I come in?" the man said imploringly.

"No, I don't think you must," the girl answered. "You see, Auntie has gone to Colchester, and she wouldn't like me to ask you in when I knew she wasn't there. No, I don't think you must come in this time."

"Perhaps she will be back by this time," he urged; but the girl shook her head resolutely.

"No; for the train does not get to Wrabness till twenty-four minutes past seven—it is not as much past six yet," she said simply.

"But," he said, finding that there was no chance of his effecting an entrance within the fortress, "are you bound to go in just yet?"

"No, I am not; but you are bound to go back to Lady Jane's for your dog-cart. She knows that you came with me, and she knows that Auntie is in Colchester."

"Lady Jane knows too much," he said vexedly. "Yes, I suppose I must go back. But I may carry your racket as far as the door, eh?"

"Oh, I think you may do that," answered the girl demurely.

So together they turned and walked on. The road took a curve to the right, skirting the sloping meadow and rising gradually until they reached the gates of the old house, with its quaint red front and its many gables and dormer windows, and at the gate Dorothy Strode stopped and held out her hand for the racket.

"Thank you very much for bringing me home," she said shyly, but with an upward glance of her blue eyes that went straight to the man's perhaps rather susceptible heart; "it was very good of you."

"Yes, but tell me," he answered, not letting go his hold of the racket, "the aunt has gone to Colchester, you say?"

"Yes."

"Does she often go?"

"Oh, no, not often."

"But how often? Once a week?"

"Once a week—oh no, not once a month. Why do you ask?"

"Because, for the present, I live in Colchester. I am quartered there, you know, and I thought that perhaps sometimes when the auntie was coming you might be coming too, and I might show you round a little—the lions and all that, you know. That was all."

"But I don't think," said Dorothy Strode, taking him literally, "that Auntie would ever want to be shown round Colchester, or the lions, or anything. You see, she has lived at the Hall for more than fifty years and probably knows Colchester a thousand times as well as you do."

"True! I might have thought of that," and he laughed a little at his own mistake, then added suddenly, "But don't you think your aunt might like to come and have afternoon tea in my quarters? Old ladies generally love a bachelor tea."

"I don't think she would," said Dorothy honestly. "You see, Mr. Harris, my aunt is rather strict, and she never does anything unusual, and——" At that moment she broke off short as a fairly smart dog-cart driven by a young man passed them, and returned the salute of the occupant, who had lifted his hat as soon as he saw her.

"Who is that?" asked the soldier rather jealously, frowning a little as he noticed the girl's heightened colour.

"That is Mr. Stevenson," she answered, looking straight in front of her.

"Oh, Mr. Stevenson. And who is he when he's at home?" the soldier demanded.

"Very much the same as when he is not at home," answered Dorothy with a gay laugh.

He laughed too. "But tell me, who is he?"

"Oh, one of the gentlemen farmers round about."

It was evident that she did not want to talk about the owner of the dog-cart, but the soldier went on without heeding, "And you know him well?"

"I have known him all my life," she said, with studied carelessness.

In the face of her evident unwillingness to enlarge upon the subject, the soldier had no choice but to let her take the racket from him.

"Good-bye," she said, holding out her hand to him.

"Good-bye," he answered, holding it a good deal longer than was necessary; "but tell me I may come and call?"

"Yes, I think you might do that."

"You will tell your aunt that you met me, and that I am coming to call to-morrow?"

"That is a little soon, isn't it?" she said, laughing. "Besides, to-morrow there is a sewing-meeting."

"And you go?"

"Always."

"And you like it?" incredulously.

"No, candidly I don't; but in this world, at least in Graveleigh, one has to do a great many things that one does not like."

"And you might have to do worse things than go to a sewing-meeting, eh?" he suggested, for it suddenly flashed into his mind that there would be no gentlemen farmers in smart dog-carts at such very feminine functions as sewing-meetings.

"That is so. Well, good-bye."

"But you haven't said when I may come," he cried.

"No; say one day next week," with a gay laugh.

"But which day?"

"Oh, you must take your chance of that. Good-bye," and then she passed in at the wide old gate, and disappeared among the bushes and shrubs which lined the short and crooked carriage-drive leading to the house.

For a moment he stood there looking after her, then turned on his heel and retraced the steps which he had taken in Dorothy Strode's company, and as he went along he went again over all that she had

said, thought of her beauty, her soft blue eyes, and fair wind-tossed hair, of the grace of her movements, the strength and skill of her play, the sweet half-shy voice, the gentle manner with now and then just a touch of roguish fun to relieve its softness. Then he recalled how she had looked up at him, and how softly she had spoken his name, "Mr. Harris," just as that farmer-fellow came along to distract her attention and bring the bright colour into her cheeks, and, by Jove! he had come away and never told her that his name was not Harris at all, but Aylmer—Richard Aylmer, commonly known as "Dick," not only in his regiment, but in every place where he was known at all. Now how, his thoughts ran, could the little woman have got hold of an idea that his name was Harris? Dick Harris! Well, to be sure, it didn't sound bad, but then it did not suit him. Dick Aylmer he was, and Dick Aylmer he would be to the end of the chapter, except—except—ah, well, well, that was a contingency he need not trouble himself about at present. It was but a contingency and a remote one, and he could let it take care of itself until the time came for him to fairly look it in the face, when probably matters would conveniently and comfortably arrange themselves.

And then he fell to thinking about her again, and what a pretty name hers was—Dorothy Strode! Such a pretty name, only Dorothy Aylmer would look even prettier—Mrs. Richard Aylmer the prettiest of all, except, perhaps, to hear his men friends calling her "Mrs. Dick."

And then he pulled himself up with a laugh to think how fast his thoughts had been running on—

why, he had actually married himself already, after an hour and a half's acquaintance and before even he had begun his wooing! And with another laugh he turned in at the gates of Lady Jane's place, where he must say his farewells and get his dog-cart.

Lady Jane was still out on the lawn, and welcomed him with a smile. She was a stout motherly woman, still young enough to be sympathetic.

"Ah, you are back," she said. "Now, is not that a nice girl?"

"Charming," returned Dick, sitting down beside her and answering in his most conventional manner.

Lady Jane frowned a little, being quite deceived by the tone. She was fond of Dorothy herself and would dearly like to make a match up for her. She had seen with joy that Mr. Aylmer seemed very attentive to her, and had encouraged him in his offer to escort her down the road to her aunt's house—and now he had come back again with his cold conventional tones as if Dorothy was the tenth *charming* girl he had taken home that afternoon, and he had not cared much about the task.

"I heard you say a little time ago that you were going away," he remarked, after a moment's pause.

"Yes, we are off to-night by the boat from Harwich," she answered. "Yes, it is rather a long passage—twelve hours—but the boats are big and the weather is smooth, and it is a great convenience being able to drive from one's own door to the boat itself—one starts so much fresher, you know."

"Yes, that must be so," he replied, "though I never went over by this route. And how long do you stay?"

"All the winter," Lady Jane answered. "We go to Kissingen, though it is a trifle late for the place. Then on by the Engadine, Italian Lakes, and to Marseilles. After that to Algiers for several months."

"Algiers," he said in surprise, "really?"

"Yes, I need a warm climate in the winter, and it gives Mr. Sturt a change both of life and of sport, so that he does not really feel being out of England for so long."

"And you come back next spring?"

"Yes; sometime next spring," she answered.

Dick Aylmer got up then and began to make his adieux.

"Then good-bye, Mr. Harris," said Lady Jane, with much cordiality, "and I hope to find you still at Colchester when we come back again. If not, you must come and see me in London during the season."

"Thanks, very many," he said, "but my——"

"Oh!" cried Lady Jane, in dismay, "look, look! the fox-terrier is worrying the Persian kitten. Do rescue it somebody, do, do!"

In a moment the kitten, a little the worse for wear and tear, was safely in her mistress's arms, and a great fuss did she make over it. In the midst of it, Dick Aylmer, knowing that his fretful horse was dancing about on the other side of the house, said good-bye again and escaped. "And, by Jove," he said, as he turned out of the gates, "she does not know my name either. I seem bound to be mysterious to-day, somehow or other. Evidently she mistook me for Haines—or, rather, she mistook me for the other in the matter of names. Ah, well, she's going

away to-morrow, and I don't suppose I shall see her again, or that it matters in the least whether she calls me Harris, or Haines, or Aylmer," and then he added to the horse, "Get along, old man, will you?"

He slackened the pace, however, when they got to the turn of the road which skirted the sloping meadow in front of the Hall where *she* lived, and the good horse crawled up the side of the hill as if it had been an Alpine height instead of a mere bend of the road. But there was no sign of her. As he passed he caught a glimpse of the gay flower-beds and of a big tabby cat walking leisurely across the terrace, but Dorothy Strode was not to be seen, and when Richard Aylmer recognised that fact as a fact, he gave a jerk to the reins and sent the horse flying along in the direction of Colchester as fast as his four good legs would carry him.

CHAPTER II.

DAVID STEVENSON.

DOROTHY STRODE said very little to her aunt about the gentleman who had brought her home from Lady Jane's tennis party. Not that she voluntarily kept anything back, but in truth there was very little for her to tell, very little that she could tell. The language of love is an eloquent one, but when you are one of the principal persons concerned, you cannot give to another the history of a pressure of the hand, or a look of the eyes, and still less of a tone of the voice which tells you all too eloquently of the state of feelings which you cause in that other one.

Yet when Miss Dimsdale came home from Colchester, having been fetched from Wrabness Station in an ancient victoria which had seen better days, drawn by a pair of cobs which, let us mercifully hope, would never see worse than they enjoyed in sleek comfort at present, she dutifully—ay, and with pleasure, gave her an animated description of the party. How Lady Jane had specially asked for her and had sent her dear love to her; how sorry she was, and everybody else, that Miss Dimsdale had had to go and see that tiresome lawyer on that particular afternoon; how Lady Jane had told her that her new white frock was exquisite, and that she ought always to wear full sleeves because they

became her so well, and finally how there had been one of the officers from Colchester at the party and she had been his partner in several games of tennis, and finally that Lady Jane had sent him to see her safely to the gate. "Our gate, I mean, Auntie," said Dorothy, not wishing to convey a false impression.

"And David Stevenson, he wasn't there, I suppose?" said Miss Dimsdale, as she sipped her claret.

"No, Auntie, he wasn't," Dorothy answered. "You see, Lady Jane does not like David Stevenson very much."

"I know that," said Miss Dimsdale shortly.

On the whole Miss Dimsdale would have liked Dorothy to marry David Stevenson, who was young and a good-enough fellow to make a good husband. He had a well-kept valuable farm of four hundred acres a mile or two from Graveleigh, with a convenient and spacious house thereon, of which he was very anxious to make Dorothy the mistress. But Dorothy had, with a strange perversity, said nay over and over again, and she seemed in no desire to change her mind now. Miss Dimsdale gave a sigh as she thought of it—for David Stevenson's mother had been her dearest friend—but all the same, she was not the woman to try to force the child's inclination.

"Mr. Harris asked me if he might call—if he might come and see me," said Dorothy presently, after a pause.

"Mr. Harris! and who is Mr. Harris?" asked Miss Dimsdale, startled out of a reverie about David Stevenson's mother, who, by-the-bye, unconsciously

and dear friend as she was of Marion Dimsdale's, had stepped in and married the man of Marion's heart.

"Mr. Harris! He is the officer I told you about, Auntie, the one who brought me home," said Dorothy, in surprise that her aunt should not remember.

"Oh, yes—yes. And what did you say?"

"I told him that I thought he might."

"And when?"

"Oh, I told him to take his chance," Dorothy answered.

"Quite right," said Miss Dimsdale, who had no notion of making the way of a gallant too easy and pleasant to him. "Well, we shall see what he is like when he comes, if we happen to be at home."

She began then to tell Dorothy all about her day in Colchester. What the lawyer had said, how she had been to the bank, and had looked in at the saddler's to say that the harness of the little cob which ran in the village cart must be overhauled and generally looked to. Then how she had found time to go in the fancy-work shop and had bought one or two new things in that line, and last of all how she had been in to the jeweller's to get a new watch-key and had there seen a wonderful belt of silver coins which some one had sold for melting down, and this had been offered to her at such a reasonable price that she had been tempted to buy it.

"*Auntie!*" cried Dorothy.

"Oh, I did not say it was for you, child," said Miss Dimsdale promptly.

Dorothy's face fell, and Miss Dimsdale laughed.

"There, child, there, I won't tease you about it. There it is on the chimney-shelf."

And Dorothy naturally enough jumped up and ran to open the box in which the belt was packed, opening it eagerly, and uttering a cry of delight when she saw the beautiful ornament lying within. It was a lovely thing, and in her pleasure and pride at the possession of it Dorothy almost forgot her new admirer, Mr. Harris.

Not quite though, for when she slipped it on over her pretty white dress and ran to the pier-glass between the windows of the drawing-room to see the effect of it, she suddenly found herself wondering how he would think she looked in it, and instantly the swift colour flashed into her cheeks, so that she hardly liked to turn back to face the gaze of her aunt's calm far-seeing eyes.

Miss Dimsdale meanwhile had walked to the window, and was looking out into the soft evening dusk.

"Some one is coming along the drive," she said. "I think it is David Stevenson."

A gesture of impatience was Dorothy's answer, a gesture accompanied by an equally impatient sound, but she never thought of making good use of her time and escaping out of the room, as a girl brought up in a town might have done. No, she left the glass and went across the room to the table where her work-basket stood, and took up an elaborate table-cover which she had been working at in a more or less desultory fashion for six months past, and by the time David Stevenson was shown in she was stitching away as if for dear life. Miss Dimsdale, on

the contrary, did not move from the window until she heard the door open, then she went a few steps to meet him.

"Good evening, David," she said very kindly. "How very nice of you to come in to-night! We have not seen you for a long time."

"No, I've been dreadfully busy," he answered, "and I am still, for the matter of that. But I hadn't seen you for a long time, and I thought I'd come over and see how you were getting on."

"That was very good of you," said Miss Dimsdale; then she moved to the bell and rang it. "We will have a light, the evenings are closing in very fast."

"Yes," he answered.

Then he went across where already his eyes had wandered to Dorothy, who was bravely sewing away in the dusk.

"How are you, Dorothy?" he asked.

"I am quite well, thank you, David," she replied, just letting her hand rest for a moment in his.

"I saw you this afternoon," he went on, seating himself on a chair just in front of her.

"Why, yes," said Dorothy, "you took your hat off to me."

He was a fine-grown, good-looking fellow, big and strong and young, with the unmistakable air of a man who is his own master; but in Dorothy's mind a vision rose up at that moment of another young man, who was also big and strong, and very unlike David Stevenson.

David frowned at the remembrance of the afternoon and of her companion, and just then a neat maid-servant came in with a lamp, and the dusk

vanished. She set the lamp down beside Dorothy, so that David Stevenson was enabled to see her face clearly.

"If you please, ma'am," said Barbara to her mistress, "Janet Benham has come up to speak to you. She's in great trouble about something."

"Janet Benham in trouble!" cried Miss Dimsdale, in dismay. "Oh, I will come at once. Dorothy, stay and talk to David," she added, for Dorothy had made a movement as if she, too, wanted to go and hear more about Janet's trouble.

However, in the face of her aunt's distinct command, she had no choice but to remain where she was, and she took up the work again and began a-stitching vehemently as if she would fain sew her vexation into the pretty pattern.

David Stevenson, on the contrary, was more than well satisfied at the way in which matters had fallen, and inwardly blessed that trouble of Janet Benham's as much as Dorothy did the contrary. He jerked his chair an inch or so nearer to hers, and leaned forward with his elbows upon his knees. Dorothy sat up very straight indeed, and kept her attention strictly upon her work.

"Who was that fellow I saw you talking to this afternoon, Dorothy?" he asked.

"A man that Lady Jane asked to see me home," answered Dorothy, promptly.

"Oh, you had been to Lady Jane's?" in a distinctly mollified tone.

"Yes, I had been to Lady Jane's," returned Dorothy, matching a bit of yellow silk with minute care. "Why didn't you go?"

"Because I wasn't asked," said he curtly. "Lady Jane never asks me now—she's taken a dislike to me."

"Well, I can't help that," said Dorothy indifferently.

"I don't know so much about that," he said rather gloomily. "I think you might if you liked. Not that I want you to trouble about it, or that I care a single brass farthing about Lady Jane or her parties. In any case, I should only go because I might meet you there."

"Oh, that's a poor enough reason," cried Dorothy, flippantly.

There was very little of the mute lover about David Stevenson, and whenever he found that Dorothy was, in spite of good opportunities, slipping further and further away from him, he always got impatient and angry.

"Well, I don't know that you're far wrong there," he retorted, in a tone which he tried with the most indifferent success to make cool and slighting. "However, her ladyship has left off asking me to her entertainments of late, and I don't know that I feel any the worse man for that. So you met that fellow there, did you?"

"You don't suppose I picked him up on the road, do you?" demanded Dorothy, who was getting angry too.

David drew in his horns a little. "No, no, of course not," he said soothingly. "I had no right to ask anything about him, only everything you do and everyone you speak to interest me. I wanted to know who he was, that was all."

"Then," said Dorothy, with a very dignified air, "you had better go and ask Lady Jane herself. She can tell you, and I am sure she will. I know very little about the gentleman—just his name and very little besides."

David Stevenson sat back in his chair with a groan; Dorothy Strode stitched away furiously; and so they sat until Miss Dimsdale came back again. "H'm," her thoughts ran, "quarrelling again."

Dorothy looked up at her aunt and spoke in her softest voice. "What was the matter with Janet, Auntie?" she asked.

"Oh, poor thing! Joe came home drunk and knocked her about, and one of the neighbours, who couldn't bear it any longer, went and fetched the policeman, and Joe was marched off, to poor Janet's unutterable dismay," Miss Dimsdale replied.

"Poor Janet!" murmured Dorothy softly.

"By-the-bye, Joe Benham works for you, David, does he not?" Miss Dimsdale asked.

"Yes, he does.

"I wonder couldn t you do something? Poor Janet is in the most dreadful trouble about him."

"Well, I'll go round and see if you like," David answered; "but Benham's an awful brute, and will drink all he can get hold of to the end of the chapter. I don't know whether you have ever noticed it, Miss Dimsdale, but somehow it seems to me that almost invariably the women prefer to marry the wrong men, and *vice versâ*. Look at my own mother, for instance: a sweeter creature did not live, but she was never the right wife for my father, and nobody knew it better than himself. Yes, and

she knew it too. She always used to tell my father that when he went from Graveleigh Hall to Dovercourt, he made the greatest mistake of his life."

"*Past* Graveleigh Hall, you mean, David," put in Dorothy, sharply. "I dare say he knew very well what he was about, and took the one because he could not get the other."

"My dears, my dears," cried Miss Dimsdale, to whom all this was untold agony, "let bygones be bygones. I am sure, David, that your father was in love with your mother to the very end. Really, the young people of to-day take too much upon themselves and settle the affairs of their elders in an off-hand way which is positively indecent."

There was a sound of tears in Miss Dimsdale's voice which went near to betraying that this subject had more than a common interest for her. Dorothy recognised dimly that her aunt was pained by something that had been said, and never sorry to have an excuse for finding fault with David, she turned sharply upon him.

"Really, David," she cried, "it is very dishonourable of you to come telling us what your mother used to say to your father—it could never have been meant for us to hear, probably not for you either. They are both dead, and their mistakes are at an end. We don't want to know anything about them. For my part, David," she went on, severely eyeing the young man, who had turned a fine scarlet hue at her rather pointed remarks, "I must say that I am surprised to find you are capable either of listening or of tattling about it afterwards."

He tried hard to laugh it off as if she had uttered

some wonderful joke, but his face was burning with shame and anger too, and as soon as he conveniently could he betook himself away.

"Dorothy dear, you were a little hard on him," said Miss Dimsdale, with a sigh; after all, he was her old love's son, and his mother had been her dearest friend.

"Not at all," said Dorothy, sharply. "David should keep his reminiscences to himself."

"I wish you liked David better," said Miss Dimsdale, rather wistfully.

"So do I, Auntie, for your sake," answered Dorothy. "You know I do. But I don't like him at all: I never did—I never shall. I can't bear him, and if David was a man," with withering scorn, "he would take no for an answer and leave me alone."

CHAPTER III.

MR. HARRIS.

IT happened that two days later than this our friend Dick Aylmer received a letter, which ran thus:—

"Your cousin,"—there was no affectionate prefix —"Mary Annandale, writes to me this morning to announce her engagement and approaching marriage to Prince Louis Lorinoff—so there is half a million of money lost to the family and thrown clean out of the country. I sent a wire of congratulation, being too disgusted to write a letter. With you, you infernal young idiot, I haven't got the patience of a mouse—I hope you will live to bitterly repent it. Meantime, keep out of my way till I've got over it a bit, and don't expect a penny beyond your four hundred a year, because you won't get it. And if I hear of your marrying *any*body under a hundred thousand pounds, I'll cut off your allowance. After you're forty we can think about it, but you need never expect me to fall in very quickly with your views, as you have not troubled yourself to fall in with mine. And I think it only just to tell you that *if I have a chance* I shall marry again, in the hope of having an heir of my own.

"Yours,

"AYLMER."

Dick read it and read it again, then tossed it aside with a short laugh.

"Nice letter to have from one's nearest relative," he said to himself. "He'll marry again in the hope of having an heir of his own. Aye, but her Ladyship is as tough as leather and as hard as nails, and she'll take good care he doesn't have *that* chance. Well," with a long breath that was half a sigh and half only an expression of relief, "so Mary Annandale is going to be the Princess Louis Lorinoff! By Jove, I don't envy Monsieur le Prince! Not a bit of it—not even for half a million of money. And I'm to keep out of his way. Well, I'll obey that command with all the pleasure in life. And I'm not to marry before I'm forty—that's what it amounts to practically. Well, I don't know that I mind that very much—do I? Ah! well, I don't so much know about that—I——" and then he stopped short and fell into a sort of dream, a dream of himself walking along a country road and beside him—"and, oh! damnation," said Dick Aylmer, aloud, "what did the old brute want to write to me for?"

He struck a match and set fire to the letter; then a sudden thought occurred to him, and he crushed the flame out and locked the letter carefully away in his despatch box. "I may find that remark about marrying again useful," he said to himself. "Anyway, best to keep it."

But though he had locked the letter away, he could not put the thoughts of it away from him as easily. Indeed, it kept coming back to him again and again, particularly that one unpalatable sentence about him waiting till he was forty before he need

expect his uncle to hear of his marrying under a certain amount of dower with the bride.

Now, Dick Aylmer was utterly ignorant of the circumstances in which the little girl of his dream was placed. She might have a dower, it might be large or small, he did not know; and on the other hand, it was more than likely that she had not so much as a penny in the world. Somehow, although he had never been within the precincts of Graveleigh Hall, he had an idea that it was a place without much money behind it. True, the beds in front of the house were gay with flowers and the house was large and of a certain appearance. But the hedges which skirted the sloping meadow were none too well kept; the entrance gates needed a coat of paint badly, and had apparently got well used to the necessity; the drive was not very well kept, and altogether he fancied that Dorothy Strode's dower would be but a thing of small importance compared with his uncle's idea of what Dick's wife ought to be possessed of.

Now, I may as well say here that Dick Aylmer had made up his mind to marry the little girl of his dream. It might be sooner or it might be later, but he meant to do it all the same. If he could get her sooner—why, he would; and if he could not get her as soon as he wanted her—why, he would have to wait; but as for waiting till his savage old uncle chose to say "yea or nay"—why, the idea was simply preposterous, and Dick put it aside at once as a contingency which could not be considered for a moment. After all, his marriage was his business, his and nobody else's on his side; he meant to

marry to please himself, and his uncle could go to the deuce if he liked. After all, if he did marry her or any other girl that he chose to marry, and his uncle cut up rough over it, what could he do? He could, and probably would, stop his allowance immediately. But then he had absolutely no guarantee that the old savage might not from mere caprice do that at any moment, when he would have no other course open to him but to exchange into a regiment serving in India, and live on his pay. So that, after all, what was the good of his depending too much on his uncle, who would, if his wife happened to die, assuredly marry again on the chance of having an heir who would cut him out of his heritage?

All the same, Dick Aylmer did not think that there was the remotest chance of his uncle's wife leaving the way clear for a successor—her Ladyship was at least fifteen years younger than her lord, and was a woman of aggressively good health, which she kept in perfect order by living by line and rule; and he reminded himself that beyond stopping his allowance and possibly having another heir, Lord Aylmer was absolutely powerless to leave one stick or stone away from him, the property must go with the title to the heir who was to follow him.

A couple of days went by, and Dick Aylmer had almost forgotten his uncle's letter in the pleasures of anticipation, and by the time he turned out of the barrack gates, bound for Graveleigh Hall to make his formal call upon Dorothy Strode's aunt, he was in as gay and lightsome a mood as he had ever been in in all his life. And, oh! by Jove, he reminded

himself he had forgotten, or more correctly he had never known, what the old lady's name was. Dorothy had called her "Auntie," and he had naturally said "your aunt," and he had come away without knowing what her name and state were, whether she was wife, widow, or maid.

However, he did not let that trouble him much, and he drove gaily along between the sweet wild hedgerows, feeling as if the soft September air, just tempered with a breeze off the sea, was air of an Arcadian land, and such objectionable persons as aristocratic relations did not exist in all the world. And then when he reached Graveleigh, the long straggling village street with its quaint old-world shops and its odd little post-office, he pulled up the good horse and stopped to make inquiries. "Can you tell me where Graveleigh Hall is?" he asked of a respectable woman.

"Why, yes, sir—yo do go along that road and take the first tarn to the right, and then yo do come to it," she replied.

"Ah, thanks. By-the-bye, *what* is the name of the lady who lives there?" he asked carelessly.

"Miss Dimsdale, she do live at the Hall," the woman replied. "And Miss Dorothy, she do live with her."

"Thank you very much," said Dick pleasantly.

The good woman watched him as he drove along. "Another of 'em after Miss Dorothy," she said to herself.

And Dick drove gaily along, getting more and more light-hearted as he went; for was he not getting nearer and nearer with every stride of old Derby's

legs to *her?* But he did not get to the Hall without being further watched. Scarce was he past the end of the village before he met David Stevenson, wearing the light clothes and gaiters of a country gentleman who looks after his own farming, and David scowled at him murderously. Happily Dick neither saw his rival nor his black looks, and drove on, flicking like a schoolboy at the hedges as he passed.

"Brute! interloper!" David growled out between his strong teeth, as he stood leaning over the gate, watching the fast-retreating dog-cart. "Going there, of course."

He was strongly tempted to rush off home and dress himself and go off to the Hall after Dick, but he resisted the temptation with a hopeless feeling that he would gain nothing by it, that he would only vex himself by the sight of the other fellow philandering after the girl he had loved all his life. "She'll find him out after a bit," he said to himself; "and then she'll know how to value a man who means every word—ay, and more than every word that he says."

In the meantime Dick Aylmer went on and turned in at the hospitably open gate of Graveleigh Hall, with the assured air of one who knew beforehand what his welcome would be. "Is Miss Dimsdale at home?" he asked of Barbara, who came to the door in answer to his knock.

"I am not sure, sir," Barbara answered. "But she may be in the garden—I'll find out, sir, in a minute."

She disappeared again, leaving him there, and

then a man ran out from the side of the house, to take the horse's head; and before Barbara appeared again, Dick heard a light footstep on the gravel, and Dorothy herself, wearing a blue dress and a white sailor hat, came into sight. "Oh! Mr. Harris," she cried, in such a joyous tone that Dick's heart fairly thumped in response, "I had no idea that you were here. I wonder how it was I did not hear the wheels. Come and be introduced to my aunt; she is here, round this shrubbery—we always sit here in the hot weather, the sight of the sea helps to keep one cool. Auntie," she continued, not giving him time to say a word, "this is Mr. Harris, whom I met at Lady Jane's, who brought me home that day, you know;" then turning to Dick, she said, "This is my aunt, Miss Dimsdale."

"I am very pleased to see you, Mr. Harris," said Miss Dimsdale, holding out her hand in a frank and gracious welcome. Miss Dimsdale had the somewhat stiff manners of the last generation, or I might say, of the first half of the century, but in her own house she was always more genial than in any other place, and Dick Aylmer shook hands with her and felt—well, that a very fate was following him in his acquaintance with Dorothy Strode, for here he was again forced, as it were, to be known as Harris, when all the time his real name was Aylmer, and how was he to tell the old lady that some one or other had made a mistake—that is, without giving himself the look of an impostor. Like lightning there flashed through his mind an idea that if Lady Jane had mistaken him for somebody else, she had really no guarantee of his respectability, and with

equal rapidity there shot through his brain a remembrance of his uncle's letter, his uncle's threats, and his uncle's unyielding, unbendable—yes, I must be honest and finish up the sentence as Dick thought it—his uncle's unyielding, unbendable, devil of a temper. And so, not from any contrivance or wish of his own, Dick, in that awkward moment, let the mistake pass, and allowed the two ladies at Graveleigh Hall to believe that his name was, as they had imagined, Harris.

In behaviour he was very judicious: he talked more to the aunt than to the niece, although his eyes followed her wherever she went in a way which told Miss Dimsdale all too plainly what had brought him there.

But, judging by his serene and sober conversation with Miss Dimsdale, you might have thought that Dick was sixty instead of six-and-twenty, and Miss Dimsdale was charmed with him.

"Such a thoughtful, sensible fellow," she said to herself as she watched him presently go across the lawn with Dorothy to see her Persian kittens, just at that time the very pride and joy of her heart. Ay, but men were deceivers ever, sometimes quite unconscious though it be. At that moment Dick was saying to Dorothy, "And I thought the week would never get over—the very longest week I ever lived."

"Then why didn't you come before?" she asked, with innocent audacity.

"Come before! But you said I wasn't to come till this week," he answered. "Besides I didn't know—I wasn't sure that I mightn't get bundled out neck

and crop when I did come. Oh no, I didn't want to run the risk of that."

"Do you often get bundled out neck and crop when you go to call at houses?" Dorothy inquired demurely, and with a saucy twinkle in her eye.

"No, I don't," he replied, with a laugh. "But I have known what it was to have decided cold shoulder, and I didn't want to find it here."

"And you have not. I think Auntie has been particularly nice to you," she said, as she opened the door leading into the stable.

Dick put his hand out to open the door also, and in doing so just touched hers. "I think," said he, in a dangerously tender tone, which would greatly have enlightened Miss Dimsdale, "that she is a delightful woman: she is fit to be your aunt;" and then Dorothy laughed a little, and pushed the door open.

"See, this is my Lorna Doone," she said, going into the nearest stall, and showing him a ball of white fluff coiled up in a deep bed of hay. "Isn't she lovely?"

Dick Aylmer groaned within himself: he had fallen from a paradise of tenderness to the commonplace personality of a cat—commonplace even though it was a Persian cat which bore the name of Lorna Doone, and *she* loved it.

It was a beautiful cat without doubt, and it turned its head back at the sight of Dorothy, and purred loudly, and with evident satisfaction.

"I want to know just what you think of her," said Dorothy to Dick—"truly and honestly. Don't flatter me about her, Lorna and I don't like flattery

—we want to know the truth about ourselves—the brutal truth if you will, but truth at any price. Now, what do you think of her?"

"I can't see her properly," answered Dick.

"Lorna, dearie, get up and show yourself off," said Dorothy to the cat; then finding that the great white Persian did not move, she turned her out of her bed, and took the four kits into her own lap.

"I think she is lovely," said Dick. "Isn't she an enormous size?"

"Immense," Dorothy answered, "and a great beauty too."

By this time Dick had begun to tickle Lorna Doone's ear, and that lady began to respond after the manner of cats when they are not shy—that is to say, she had put her two forepaws upon his knee as he sat on the bed of hay, and was vigorously rubbing her cheeks, first one side and then the other, against his hand.

"She has taken to you," cried Dorothy gladly.

"Of course she has: Lorna Doone knows a good thing when she sees it," he answered, laughing. "Besides, why shouldn't she take to me?"

"Some people don't like cats," said Dorothy; "especially men."

She had not forgotten how, the very last time he was in the house, David Stevenson had kicked her favourite out of his way, not brutally or to hurt her—for David, whatever his faults, was not a brute—but because he was so jealous of Dorothy that he could not endure to see her care for anything. "How can you waste your love on a beast of a cat?" he had

burst out, when Dorothy had caught up Lorna and held her to her cheek.

"Some men hate cats—a man who comes here sometimes loathes her," she said to Dick, and Dick knew by a sort of instinct who the "some one" was.

"Oh, some men are cross-grained enough for anything," he said good-naturedly—he could afford to be good-natured, for he had realised what this girl's real feelings for "some one were." "For my part, I must say I've got a liking for a cat, but I should hardly class a beauty like this with ordinary cats. She is not only a beauty to look at, but she is evidently affectionate, and—and—and she's yours, you know."

"The tea is waiting, Miss Dorothy," said Barbara, appearing at the door just at that moment.

"Come," said Dorothy gently.

CHAPTER IV.

SUDDEN DEATH.

"I MAY come over and see you again?" said Dick to Miss Dimsdale, when he took leave of her that afternoon.

"Oh, yes," she answered. She was quite conquered by the delightful modesty of his manner. "You will generally find us in about four o'clock, for we are very quiet people, and a few tennis-parties or a dance or two are all that Dorothy sees of life. Sometimes I wish that it was different; but old trees, you know," with a smile, "are difficult to transplant."

"And Miss Dorothy does not look as if she found life at Graveleigh insupportable," said Dick, with delicate flattery.

"No; Dorothy is a good girl," Miss Dimsdale replied in a tender undertone, and then she gave a little sigh which set Dick wondering what it could mean.

Well, after this it very soon became an established custom that Dick should find his way over to Graveleigh at least twice in every week, and sometimes Miss Dimsdale asked him to stay to share their dinner, for she was a woman of very hospitable nature, though she was quiet and somewhat stiff in manner, and a little old-fashioned in her ideas. And although David Stevenson had all her wish on his side, she really grew to like Dick the better of the two,

for Dick was gentle and kind in his manner to each and all alike, content to let his wooing do itself—if the truth between you and I be told, happy in the present, and a little inclined to leave the future to be as long the future as might be because of the terrible old uncle in the background. Then, too, there was always present in his mind the knowledge that, sooner or later, he would have to make a clean breast of his identity, to Miss Dimsdale and to Dorothy, and to cast himself upon their mercy as regards the deception which had really been no fault of his, and to persuade them to consent to a secret marriage. And whenever poor Dick reached this point in his reflections, he invariably gave a groan of utter despair, for he had a dreadful foreboding that never, never, *never* would Dorothy's aunt give even the most reluctant consent to anything of the kind.

So the sweet autumn days skipped over—September died and October was born, lived its allotted time, and in turn passed away, and wintry November came in. The last tinted leaves fell from the trees of the great oaks and horse-chestnuts, and the tall poplars which shrouded the Hall were now but gaunt and shivering skeletons, only a memory of their old luxuriance and glory. But to Dorothy Strode the bare and leafless trees were more beautiful than they were either in their summer gowns of green, or in all the many-hued loveliness of their autumn frocks, for to Dorothy all the world was lighted and beautified by the warmth and fire of radiant love—better to her the leafless branches of November with love than the fairest blooms of springtime into which love had not yet come.

During this autumn she had seen but little of her old admirer, David Stevenson. He had gone to the Hall once or twice after he knew that "the man from Colchester" had become a frequent visitor there —gone with a savage assertion of his rights as an old friend and a lifelong intimate of the house. But when he found that Miss Dimsdale had, as he put it, "gone over to the enemy," he gave up even that much intercourse, and gave all his energies to his farming, content, as he told himself, to bide his time.

At last about the middle of November, when half the officers of the regiment were on leave, and soldiering and Colchester alike were as flat and dull as ditch-water, Dick Aylmer got into his dog-cart and turned the horse's head towards the big gates.

"Hullo, Dick!" called out a brother-officer to him, "where are you going?"

"Oh, a drive," returned Dick promptly.

"Oh, a drive," repeated the other, noting the evasion instantly—trust a soldier for that. "Got any room for a fellow?"

"Take you as far as the town if you like," said Dick good-naturedly.

"No, never mind," answered the other. "I'll walk down with Snooks presently."

"Didn't want a lift, you know," he explained to Snooks, who in polite society was known as Lord William Veryl, "but I did want to find out where old Dick was going. But Dick was ready for me, and as close as wax."

"Yes, I know—tried it on myself with him the other day," said Snooks reflectively. "Dick informed

me he was making a careful study of mare's-nests for the benefit of the British Association."

"The devil take those fellows," Dick was saying to himself at that moment, as he drove along. "They have either got a clue, or they've turned suspicious. Snooks the other day, and Laurence now. I shall have to make up my mind, to screw things up to a climax."

But he had not now much fear that the climax would be a disagreeable one for him; and he drove along over the muddy roads as gaily as ever he had done between the sweet September hedgerows. Yet when he drew up in front of the Hall, it struck him that there was something strange about the place. For one thing, the usually neat and well-kept gravel was cut up, and in one place the low box-hedge which skirted the now empty flower-beds was cut and crushed as if a careless driver had driven over it.

He was not long left in doubt. Old Adam came to take his horse and led him off to the stable, shaking his head with ominous sadness, and muttering something indistinctly about a bad job; and then Barbara opened the door with a scared white face, and quivering lips which could not command themselves sufficiently to tell him anything.

"Good God, what is it?" exclaimed Dick, his thoughts flying straight way to Dorothy.

But it was not Dorothy, for in two minutes she came running into the room, tried to speak, and then scared and trembling and sobbing, she found herself somehow or other in his arms.

Dick was almost beside himself with anxiety, but

he soothed her tenderly, and patted her shoulder with a gentle "There, there, darling, don't cry like that. What is it, dear? Tell me."

But for a little time Dorothy simply could not tell him. "I've been longing for you to come," she said at last. "Such an awful night we have had. Oh, poor Auntie! and she is all I have in the world—in the world."

"But is she ill?" asked he. "Remember that I know nothing."

"But you got my telegram," she said, ceasing her sobs to look at him.

"Your telegram, no! What telegram?"

"I sent one early this morning to you at Colchester," she answered—"'To R. Harris, 40th Dragoons, Colchester.' Was not that direction enough?"

"Well, scarcely," said Dick, half smiling at his own knowledge. "But about your aunt—is she ill?"

Dorothy's tears broke out afresh. "She is dying—dying," she sobbed. "The doctor says that there is *no* hope—no hope whatever."

"But tell me all about it," he urged. "What is the matter with her? She was all right yesterday afternoon when I left. It must have been very sudden. Was it a fit?"

"Paralysis," answered Dorothy mournfully. "We were just going to bed, and Auntie got up, and all at once she said, 'I feel so strange, Dorothy; fetch Barbara,' and when I came back a minute afterwards she had slipped down on to the floor by the sofa there, and could hardly speak. We put a pillow under her head, and got Adam up, and Adam drove

into Dovercourt and brought the doctor out as fast as he could, but Auntie did not know him at all. And as soon as he came in, Barbara and I knew it was all over with her, for he shook his head, and said, 'We had better get her into bed. Oh no, it won't disturb her, she feels nothing.' But she did feel something," Dorothy added, "for when we were undressing her she spoke several times, and always the same, 'My poor little girl—Dorothy—all alone,'" and here, poor child, she broke down again, sobbing over her own desolation. "I begged and prayed her not to worry about me, but it was no good. Dr. Stanley said she couldn't hear me, and so she kept on all night, 'My poor little girl—all alone.'"

For some minutes Dick never said a word. "Dorothy," he said at last, "I should like to see her. Where is she?"

"In her own bed," said Dorothy wonderingly.

"Then take me up there. Perhaps she will understand me if I tell her something."

So Dorothy took him up to the large darkened room where the mistress of the house lay dying. Barbara, filled with grief and dismay, sat keeping watch beside her, and she stared with surprise to see Dorothy come in, followed by the tall soldier, who entered with a soft tread and went up to the bed, where he stood for a moment watching the dying woman, and listening to the incoherent mumbling words that fell from her lips. "Dorothy—little girl—no one—alone—ah!—" and then a long sigh, enough to break their hearts that heard it.

"Just pull up that blind for a minute, Barbara," said Dick to the weeping woman. "I want to speak

to your mistress, and I can't tell whether she will understand me unless I can see her face."

Then as Barbara drew up the blind and let the feeble November daylight in upon the pallid face lying so stiffly among the pillows, he laid his hand upon the nerveless one lying upon the bed-cover.

"Miss Dimsdale," he said, "do you know me?" But there was no sign, and he tried again.

"Miss Dimsdale, don't you know me, Dick Harris?"

For a moment there was a death-like silence, then the dying woman muttered, "Dorothy—girl—alone."

"You are troubling about Dorothy," said Dick, slowly and clearly, "and I have something to tell you about Dorothy. Can you hear me? Cannot you make me some sign that you hear me? Can you move your hand?"

But no, the hand remained perfectly still, still and cold, as if it were dead already.

"Can you make me no sign that you hear me?" Dick urged. "I *must* tell you this about Dorothy. It will make you quite easy in your mind about her."

Still she did not move or speak, but after a moment or so her eyes slowly opened and she looked at him.

"I see that you hear me and know me," said Dick "You are troubling to know what will happen to Dorothy if you should die in this illness. Is that it?"

"Yes." She had managed to speak intelligibly at last, and Dick pressed the cold, nerveless hand still covered by his own.

"I want to marry Dorothy at once," he said very clearly and gently. "I should have asked you for her soon in any case. But you will be quite satisfied to know that she is safe with me, won't you?"

There was another silence; then the poor tied tongue tried to speak, tried again, and at last mumbled something which the three listeners knew was, "Bless you."

"Auntie, Auntie," sobbed Dorothy, in an agony, "say one word to me—to me and poor Barbara, do."

The dying eyes turned towards the faithful servant, and a flickering smile passed across the worn grey face.

"Old friends," she said more clearly than she had yet spoken. "Very happy," and the eyes turned towards Dick.

"Auntie!" cried Dorothy.

"My little girl," said the dying woman, almost clearly now. "My dear, good child. I am quite happy."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the girl's wild sobs, and when Dick looked up again, the grey shadows had fallen again over the worn face, and he knew that her mind was at rest now.

And in the quiet watches of that night Marion Dimsdale passed quietly away, just as the tide turned backward to the great North Sea.

CHAPTER V.

DAVID STEVENSON'S EXPLANATION.

DICK stayed at Graveleigh Hall until the end came, after which he bade Dorothy go to bed; and he put his horse in and drove back to Colchester, which he reached in time for the day's duty, being orderly-officer for the day.

"I must stay in barracks all to-morrow, darling, I am on duty," he explained to her; "but I'll get leave the next day, and come out here in the morning. Meantime, will you and Barbara say nothing of the engagement between us—I want to have a long talk to you before any one else knows a single word."

And Dorothy, of course, promised, and Barbara promised too, believing quite that Mr. Harris wished to say nothing about marrying and giving in marriage while the dear mistress of the house lay cold and still within it.

It was a sad and wretched day. The news spread quickly through the neighbourhood, and every few minutes inquirers came to the door to hear the details from Barbara and ask kindly for Dorothy. And about noon, by the time Dorothy had dragged herself out of bed and was sitting miserably beside the drawing-room fire, David Stevenson rode along the avenue and told Barbara that he wanted to see Miss Dorothy.

"Miss Dorothy is very poorly and upset, sir," said Barbara, who had a sort of instinct that Dorothy would rather not see this particular visitor.

"Yes, but I must see her, all the same," said David, curtly. "Where is she?"

"In the drawing-room, sir," said Barbara. "But I don't think I can let you go in without asking Miss Dorothy—I——"

"Do you know," asked David, with exasperating calmness, "that I am Miss Dimsdale's sole executor? No, I thought not. Then you will understand now, perhaps, that it is necessary that I should see her—to find out her wishes with regard to the funeral for one thing, and to give her authority to have her black frocks made for another;" and then, poor Barbara having shrunk away scared and trembling from this new and strange David Stevenson, whom she did not seem to know at all, he went straight to the drawing-room, going in and shutting the door behind him.

Dorothy jumped up with a cry almost of alarm when she saw who had thus entered. "There," said he coldly, motioning her back to her chair, "don't be afraid, I shall not hurt you," and then he got himself a chair and set it a little way from hers.

"I was obliged to come and see you at once, Dorothy," he said, in a cold and formal way, "because your poor aunt made me the sole executor under her will. But first let me say how very, very sorry I am that I have to come like this. I have known Miss Dimsdale all my life, and loved her always."

Dorothy had softened a little at this, and before he

had ended his sentence, began to cry piteously. David Stevenson went on—

"I don't want to speak about the reason why she left me in charge of everything," he said—"at least, not just now. Of course, she thought that everything would be very different with us. And then, too, she was a good deal mixed up with me in business matters, and I believe she wished that the outside world should know as little of her affairs as possible. Now, Dorothy, it shall be as you wish: I will either simply hear your wishes about the funeral and the mourning and all that, and tell you how your affairs stand by-and by, or I will tell you now, whichever you like."

"I would rather know the worst now," said Dorothy, in a very low voice. She knew from his manner that he had no comforting news to tell her.

"Then I will tell you," said he, in a strained tone; "and first I must ask you, did Miss Dimsdale ever tell you that she had had great losses during the past two years?"

"Losses!" cried Dorothy, with open eyes. "No; I don't know what you mean."

"I feared not. Well, she had several terrible losses of money, and—and, to cut a long story short, Dorothy, I advanced her several large sums on—on the security of this property."

"Then this—go on," said Dorothy.

"At that time Miss Dimsdale and I both thought that everything would be different between you and me, and, in fact, that I was but advancing money to you. We thought that the world—our little world here, I mean—would never know anything about it,

and she was obliged to sell the Hall to somebody. I gave her more for it, than anybody else in the world would have done, because—well, because I wished to oblige her, and to help her over this difficulty. On no account would I have disturbed her here, or have taken a farthing of rent from her, if she had lived to be ninety."

"Then this is your house?" Dorothy cried.

"It is," he answered quietly.

"But Auntie had a very large annuity," she exclaimed.

"I know it. But then you must remember that she had always been accustomed to live up to her full income—to keep her carriage and pair, her gardener and her maids. Indeed, Miss Dimsdale never had any money to spare, and it was in the hope of making more of the loose money that she had, money that was apart from her estate and her settled annuity, that she unfortunately bought, among other things, two shares in a bank which was not safe, which, indeed, failed and left her liable for nearly as much money as the Hall and the lands were worth."

"Then was my aunt a pensioner on your bounty?" Dorothy cried, her face all aflame at the idea.

"Certainly not," with a bitter smile at the pride on the soft little face. "I was not to take possession until her death, and she had always her annuity; but after that loss she never lived in the same comfort quite as she had done before."

"I never noticed it," Dorothy put in.

"Perhaps not. She was most anxious that you should not do so."

"Then this is your house!" said Dorothy, rising. "Stay, let me speak. I will not keep you out of your rights. The day after she"—her voice trembling—"is taken away, I, too, will go," and then she turned away, to hide alike her anger and her tears.

David Stevenson rose also, his face hard and set in response to the bitterness of the girl's tones, his hands trembling, and his heart as heavy as lead. A sharp reply rose to his tongue, but it went no further, for all at once the sight of Dorothy's grief touched and softened him.

"Dorothy! Dorothy!" he said, "what can I ever have said or done to you that you should treat me like this? I have loved you all my life, just as I love you now, but there is no crime in that, surely? By writing and asking you to be my wife, I certainly never meant to insult you, and yet you seem to think I have done you some deadly wrong to offer you what most men consider the highest compliment they can pay to any woman. The idea of you talking of my *rights* here, when your aunt is still lying in the house, is too cruel, too unkind. I am not an interloper, who cheated my friend out of her dues; on the contrary, I saved her from all the unpleasantness and the expense of exposure. She never looked upon me as you do now. I don't think, Dorothy," he ended reproachfully, "that I have deserved this from you."

Dorothy had hidden her face upon the chimney-shelf. "I am very miserable," she said, in choking voice. "I'm very sorry."

David Stevenson drew his own conclusions from the admission; then after a minute or two of silence,

ne said, "There is one thing I should like to tell you before I go, Dorothy——"

"Yes," very meekly.

"It is—don't think I am trying to force myself on you when you are in trouble, for it is because you are alone and in trouble that I must tell you. It is that I think now about you as I always have thought, and as I believe I always shall think. And I want you to remember, Dorothy, that if ever you feel any differently towards me than you have done lately, you have only to send a line and say, 'David, I want you.' Or if you choose to go away into the world altogether, to marry, to do anything, you know that, *whatever* happens, one pair of arms will always be open for you, one lover always ready to call you mistress, one man always ready to lie down under your feet. That was what I came to say to-day."

There was a death-like silence. Dorothy struggled to speak, but could not. Then she put out her hand in a blind sort of way towards him, and David bent down and kissed it.

Neither of them said a word more, and after a moment or so he released her hand, and went out of the room, knowing as surely as if she had said it in plain words, that Dorothy Strode had given her heart away, and that she would never send for him in this world; that it was all over, and at an end between them for ever.

So he went home to his own handsome, lonely house, and looked round as a condemned man may look around the cell which is to be his while life lasts. He was quietly and utterly miserable, for until a few months ago Dorothy had been the life

and mainspring of his life. If he had made any improvement in his house, it had been for Dorothy. If he had planted a shrub or a young tree, it had been for Dorothy. He had bought a smart little village cart, thinking that it was just what Dorothy would like to drive herself about the lanes in—but it had all been for nothing; and in that bitter hour of realisation he knew that he would live out his life alone, and that Dorothy Strode would never come, except in dreams, vain, hopeless dreams, to be the mistress of Holroyd.

A couple of hours passed before he remembered that he had never mentioned the subject of Miss Dimsdale's funeral to Dorothy, or actually told her in what precise circumstances she had been left.

"I have lost my head over all this business," he said, with a grim laugh to himself; "and she, poor little girl, is probably worrying herself to know whether she can afford to buy herself a black gown. I must send her a line down at once."

Dorothy therefore, in something less than an hour's time, received the following note :—

"My dear Dorothy,—I quite forgot this morning to mention several matters of importance just now. First, to tell you that when everything is settled, there will be at least a thousand pounds for you. Your aunt has left you everything. Therefore I have sent into Colchester for Mawson to come out and see you about the funeral, which will be, of course, in every respect as you wish to have it. May I suggest to you that you shall carry out Miss Dims-

dale's often-expressed views on this subject—plain and good and without ostentation? With regard to your mourning, it will be best for you to employ your regular dress people. I am *obliged* to mention this, as, not being of age, you cannot legally pay for necessary bills. After next month you will be the absolute mistress of whatever the property will realise.

"Always your true friend,

"DAVID."

This Dorothy received soon after four in the afternoon, just as Barbara had lighted the lamps in the drawing-room and drawn the crimson curtains closely over the windows.

"There is a letter, Miss Dorothy dear," she said, glad of anything that would help to break the loneliness and monotony of that awful day, "and while you read it I'll go and see if your cup of tea isn't ready: you have had nothing this day, and a cup of tea and a bit of hot buttered toast 'll be better than nothing for you."

"Thanks, Barbara," said Dorothy, listlessly.

Poor child! she cried a little over the note, because its subject brought back the remembrance of her sorrow again, but her tears did not last long; indeed, she had wept so violently during most of the day that her tears seemed to be almost exhausted now. And then she put it back on the little table at her elbow. "Poor David!" she said softly, "it is too bad for him. I wish I could have liked him: Auntie wished it too. Dear Auntie! But I can't, I can't, and Auntie liked Dick best afterwards. It made her so peaceful and happy to know that I was going

to be Dick's wife—that Dick was going to take care of me always. And yet poor David. Oh! I wish he would marry some one else. Elsie Carrington likes him so much—Elsie always thought David was perfect. I wonder when I am safely out of the way and married to Dick, whether David could be brought to think of Elsie a little. It would be such a good thing for her, and she is pretty and good and oh! so fond of him. I wonder if I were to give David just a little hint, just a suspicion of a hint that Elsie has always liked him. If he wouldn't—why, Elsie would never know that I had said anything, and then if he knew he might soon get to like her better than me. I am sure if Dick had not cared for me as he does, and had married somebody else, I would marry David at once, and Auntie would be glad too, if she knew. David used to be her favourite, and she always liked Elsie, always."

"Now, my dear," said Barbara, coming in, "here is a nice cup of tea and a plate of toast. Try to eat it, my dear; it will help you to bear it."

"Yes, Barbara," said Dorothy, her eyes filling with tears again.

CHAPTER VI.

BARBARA'S SANCTION.

THE following morning Dick Aylmer made his appearance at the Hall quite early. "How have you been getting on, my darling?" he said, when Dorothy fairly ran into his arms.

"Oh! it was such a miserable day yesterday," she answered mournfully. "I sat here alone all day crying and thinking about Auntie, except when——"

"Yes. When?"

"When David Stevenson came to see me."

Dick could not help frowning a little. "David Stevenson. Why did he come?"

"Well, because he is Auntie's executor—he has to do everything; and oh! Dick, everything belongs to him now—the very house is his."

"His, this house! Why, what do you mean?"

"I will tell you," she said. "You know; but no, of course you don't know, but I will tell you. You see, Auntie had this house and all the farm and so on, and also an annuity of eight hundred a year, which was bought for her by a very queer old aunt of hers. Well, David told me yesterday that Auntie had also what he called some loose money, and with this she speculated a little, and did pretty well with it. I dare say she was thinking of me, poor darling. Well, two years ago a bank in which she had a couple of

shares failed, and she had to pay up a great deal more money than she had, so she sold the Hall to David, for they both thought then that I should end by marrying him, and they thought nobody would ever know anything about it. David says he gave her much more than any one else would have done, and that she was never to be disturbed while she lived. But it is all David's now, and he says that there will be only about a thousand pounds for me when everything is settled. But I never knew a word till yesterday."

"And the fellow came and told all this!" cried Dick, in disgust. "Why, 'pon my word, it isn't decent. Can't he even let the mistress be carried out of the house before he claims it?"

"No, Dick, it wasn't like that," Dorothy protested meekly, anxious to do even David justice. "But, you see, he is executor and nobody can do anything without him. So he was obliged to tell me that, and then I insisted on hearing everything else."

"Oh, I see," somewhat mollified. "Then you didn't tell him anything about me?"

"We never mentioned you, Dick," she answered quickly.

He did not speak for a minute, but sat holding one of her hands in his, and tugging at his moustache with the other. "Darling," he burst out at last, "I've got such a lot to tell you, and a good deal to confess to you, that I don't know where to begin. But you will hear all I've got to say—you won't be frightened or angry, will you?"

"Dick," she said, beginning to tremble, "you are not going to throw me over?"

"Throw you over!" he repeated, half amused. "My dear, I worship the very ground you tread on. Throw you over! no, more likely you will be the one to do that."

"You frighten me," she cried, trembling still. "And I am so alone now. I used to have Auntie. I could have borne anything then, but now I feel like a poor little rudderless boat going out to an unknown sea."

"Not rudderless while I live," he replied tenderly.

"Well, Dorothy, my darling, I may as well make a clean breast of the worst at once and get it over. Don't be frightened, dear, but my name is not Harris at all."

"*Dick!*" she cried, then sat staring at him as if she could not believe her own ears. "Dick!"

"Yes, I know. But wait till you hear all, dear, and then you will see that it was not my fault, to begin with, and that I never meant really to deceive either of you."

And then he told her everything—how Lady Jane must have mistaken him for his friend Haines; how unconscious he had been that the mistake had been made until she—Dorothy, that is—had called him Mr. Harris; how that fellow Stevenson had passed just as she spoke, and he had forgotten until he got back to Lady Jane's nearly that he had parted from her leaving her under a wrong impression about him; how oddly enough almost the same thing had happened at Lady Jane's. Then he told her all about his uncle's letter—gave it to her to read, in fact—and told her how he had come to call on Miss Dimsdale, and had been prevented from giving his real name to Barbara by

Dorothy's coming to meet him and introducing him to her aunt as "Mr. Harris," and finally, how he had let the mistake pass, feeling that the whole situation was a very awkward one for him, but having always the full intention of making a clean breast of it to Miss Dimsdale sooner or later. "And the fact was," he ended half apologetically, "I thought if you both got to like me you wouldn't care whether my name was Tom, Dick, or Harry."

"But it is Dick?" she cried quite piteously.

"It is Dick—Dick Aylmer, at my darling's service," he answered; "and, after all, Aylmer is a better name than Harris, any day."

"And you will be Lord Aylmer one day!" she said, her soft eyes filled with wonder to think of it.

"Yes, always supposing the old savage does not contrive to carry his threat about an heir of his own into actual fact," Dick replied. "But then you won't like me any the less for that, I hope."

"Oh no I was not thinking of that," she said. "I was only thinking how wonderful it was that you should want to marry me. But, Dick, what will your uncle say when he finds out about it?"

"He will cut off my allowance promptly," Dick answered.

"Oh, Dick!" she said.

"Well, now, my darling, that is what I want to talk to you about. You see nobody about here, not even Lady Jane, knows me, except as Harris, regiment vague. And if the old savage finds out that I am married he will make it a necessity for me to go to India, which I don't want to do if I can help it. But if you would consent to marry me privately

under the name of Richard Harris, we should be perfectly safe so long as you were not known by any of the people in my regiment—that is, if you lived a mile or two away, or in the next town."

"It would be quite legal?" said Dorothy, in a trembling voice.

"It would be perfectly legal," he answered. "Oh! my dear," he burst out, "do you think I would be such a villain as to make a suggestion which would not be legal, while your aunt who took care of you all your life, and who left you in my charge, lay dead in the house? Listen, I have thought it all out. We will be married, if you consent, as soon as we possibly can be. Barbara will witness the marriage, but will not know my real name. I will at once make a deed declaring that I was married on such a day under the name of Harris, and leave it sealed in some place of safety, so that there can never be any trouble about the identification of the Richard Harris who was married to Dorothy Strode. We will tell Barbara that it is necessary the marriage should be kept secret for a time, and she will live with you and take care of you when I am absent. There, that is my idea. I know that it is a great sacrifice to ask of you, and I hardly like to ask it, but you see I am in this old savage's hands, so to speak. Then, on the other hand, if you don't feel that you ought to do this, or that your aunt would have objected very strongly to it, I will write at once and tell Lord Aylmer what I have done, and he must make himself as disagreeable as he pleases. Only, my dearest, that will mean India."

"Dick dear," said Dorothy, slipping her hand

within his, "we will be married privately. I don't think Auntie would have minded a bit. If she knew a thing was right, she never cared what the world had to say about it."

And so it was settled. When Dick had gone again, Dorothy rang the bell for Barbara. "Come in here, Barbara," she said, "I have something to tell you. Listen—sit down, Barbara, and promise me that what I tell you shall be a dead secret for ever until I release you from your promise."

"Miss Dorothy," said Barbara, sniffing, "I promise, but surely you know it isn't necessary."

"No, Barbara, no," soothingly, "but it is best to say all at first, isn't it? First, do you know that this house all belongs to Mr. David Stevenson?"

"To David Stevenson!" burst out Barbara, indignantly (she had known David from a little boy and detested him always). "But, Miss Dorothy, surely the dear mistress never let him get round her to *that* extent?"

"No, no," cried Dorothy, "but Auntie had to sell the Hall to somebody, and she sold it to David, and I never knew till he told me yesterday."

"Then I think, Miss Dorothy," cried Barbara, in dignified disgust, "that he might have had the decency to wait a day or two before he told you."

"No, Barbara, you are too hard on David. He has been very kind and considerate to me—most kind and considerate indeed. But he just had to tell me, he couldn't very well help himself. Of course, he does not want to turn us out—he—he wouldn't mind if we stopped here for years; but then,

you see, Barbara, I am engaged to Mr. Harris, and—and this is no place for me."

"Does Mr. David know?" Barbara inquired.

"Not yet; and that is what I wanted to tell you. You see, Barbara, Mr. Harris is very awkwardly placed. He has a relation who insists that he does not get married because he would not marry some rich girl or other that they wanted him to marry. And, of course, he wants to marry me, and he means to."

"Yes?" said Barbara, intensely interested in this very romantic situation. "Yes, Miss Dorothy, well?"

"Well, Barbara dear, we are going to be married quietly," said Dorothy, edging her chair a trifle nearer to the elderly woman's chair, "without letting anybody know, do you see?"

"Without any of the folk round about knowing?" Barbara asked.

"Just so. It won't be for always, you know, Barbara—only until Dick comes into his property; and he hasn't asked me to do anything but exactly what he had made up his mind to explain to Auntie, and ask her to give her consent to. And I feel sure she would have done so, dear Auntie, for she did get so fond of Dick."

"Yes, she did," Barbara agreed. "But, Miss Dorothy, you are sure it will be done properly—that you'll be married in church and have your lines and all that?"

"You are to see me married, Barbara," Dorothy answered simply; "Mr. Harris says so."

And after that Barbara gave her consent, so to speak, and promised to be true to her trust and

stand by her dear Miss Dorothy as long as she lived. "I think the dear mistress would be glad if she knew, Miss Dorothy."

"She did know, Barbara," said Dorothy, with a tender smile shining through her tears.

So the two sat together for a long time, talking long, and now and then weeping as some word brought back the memory of their loss. And Dorothy told the faithful servant all the plans that Dick and she had made for the strange and almost unknown future, which seemed so terrible to her who had lived all her life—all that she could remember, at least—under the same roof and guarded by the same tender care.

It was so sad to have so little joy in her engagement and her coming marriage, and yet—yet, "You mustn't think that I don't love Dick," she cried to Barbara, when she had had another passionate burst of grief over the dead woman lying above. "I do love him with all my heart, and I know that I shall be quite, quite happy by-and-bye. But it is all so sudden, so strange and new; everything is going from me at one stroke, and after we go away from Graveleigh I shall have nothing but you to remind me of the past at all. Why, I don't know. I am not at all sure that *every*thing here does not belong to David. Perhaps he can even take my Lorna Doone away and—and even drown her."

"Nay, nay, Mr. David won't want to do that," returned Barbara, soothingly. "Besides, Lorna never did belong to the mistress. Her ladyship gave her to you—the dear mistress had naught to do in the

matter. Then, Miss Dorothy dear, aren't you going to tell her ladyship about it?"

"Lady Jane last of anybody," cried Dorothy—"last of anybody."

"I see," said Barbara, with an air of wisdom; but, all the same, Barbara did not see anything. She thought the whole arrangement very strange and unusual, and she reminded herself that she had never been mixed up with anything of the kind in all her life before, and now that she was being drawn into something distinctly clandestine, she did not at all like it. Still, on the other hand, there was only the prospect of remaining at Graveleigh Hall under David Stevenson, and Barbara cordially detested David as she had always done. So, between her dislike of David Stevenson and Dorothy's promise and Mr. Harris's wish that she should see the marriage take place, Barbara graciously gave her sanction to the private union, and did not try to place any obstacles in the young folks' way.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DAYS THAT ARE NO MORE.

MISS DIMSDALE was laid away in Graveleigh Churchyard three days later. Everyone, high, low, rich, and poor, for several miles around the Hall came to pay the last token of affection and respect to her, and bitter were the tears that fell that day for the just and kind friend who was gone.

Naturally a good deal of curiosity was felt about Dorothy's future, and many were the speculations as to whether she would remain at the Hall alone with Miss Barbara, or whether she would eventually decide to go to Holroyd, or to take the good-looking officer who had been so frequent a visitor at the Hall for three months past.

With regard to Dick, there was almost a quarrel, for Dorothy, as a matter of course, had invited him to the funeral, as indeed she had asked all her aunt's friends who would be likely to attend it.

Now, Dorothy had not a relation in the world, excepting one cousin, at that time wintering in Egypt, and therefore unable to attend the ceremony. She did not enter the large drawing-room until the last moment before starting, and then only spoke a few words to those nearest the door. And when the time came for them to go, David Stevenson came forward, and with a very authoritative air, solely

due to the presence of his rival, offered Dorothy his arm.

"Mr. Harris will walk with me," faltered Dorothy, shrinking back.

"By what right?" demanded David, in a bitter under-tone.

"By the right of Miss Strode's wish, sir," put in Dick icily, "and in some measure by the right of having been the last person to whom Miss Dimsdale spoke in this world, and in some measure by the right of having been one of the three persons who saw her die."

It was all over in a minute or two, and only those standing very near to them, heard a word at all. Dick took hold of Dorothy's hand and drew her out of the room, and the rest of the company followed as they would—David Stevenson among them, his head well up in air, but his eyes gleaming with anger, and his face as white as chalk.

However, it was useless to show anger about such a matter, and the incident passed by. And when the last sad office was over, the large company separated, only the lawyer from Colchester returning to the Hall to make the usual explanations, and to read the will to Dorothy.

"And are you going to remain here for the present?" he asked the girl, kindly.

"Oh, no, I am going away at once," she answered.

"But may I ask where?" he inquired.

"Yes, we are going away, Barbara and I, for a change—I must get away, it is dreadful here. I hope I shall never come back again."

"You will feel differently after a time," said the

lawyer, kindly: he knew how things were with David Stevenson, though not what Dorothy's feelings towards him were.

The three were alone then, Dick Aylmer having purposely abstained from appearing at the house after their return from the churchyard: he was, indeed, at that very moment, sitting by the fire in Barbara's little room at the back of the house.

"Yes, perhaps after a time," she answered feverishly. "But, Mr. Marks, I wanted to ask you a question—Mr. Stevenson told me that I should have about a thousand pounds?"

"About that, I should think; but we cannot tell exactly until Miss Dimsdale's affairs are settled."

"But will you get them settled at once? I want to have everything settled," she said anxiously. "You see, I cannot arrange *any*thing for myself until I know just how I stand, and I should like to know just what I shall be able to do as soon as possible."

"Very well, we will hurry everything on as much as possible," said Mr. Marks to David, "Miss Dimsdale's affairs were in perfect order."

"Oh! yes, it will be easy enough," said David; then as the lawyer was gathering his papers together, he said in an undertone to her, "You are very anxious to shake the dust of Graveleigh off your feet, Dorothy."

The great tears welled into her eyes, and for a moment she could not speak. "I don't think you give me much encouragement to do anything else, David," she said reproachfully. "I am very anxious to go away, because it is dreadful living in this house without Auntie—dreadful; and I am very

unhappy, David, and I don't think it is very kind of you to be so—so——" but there the sobs choked her and she stopped. "I never thought you would be unkind to me," she said under her breath.

"I'm a brute," he answered. "There, don't cry, Dorothy. You shall have everything as you want it."

The result of all this was that, two days later, Dorothy and Barbara went off to Bournemouth, accompanied by Lorna Doone in a big basket, and there they remained, quietly and gradually recovering from the great shock of Miss Dimsdale's death. If they were not very happy in their simple lodgings, they were very peaceful, and once Dick came and stayed at a hotel near, for a couple of days, and then Dorothy was very happy indeed.

During this time their banns were published in one of the churches at Bournemouth and also in a London church in the parish of which Dick engaged a room and put therein some of his belongings, so as to make himself a standing in the place. But Dick was only at Bournemouth for those two days, and twice when David Stevenson was in Colchester on business, he happened to meet him in the street, not a little to his relief.

And Mr. Marks meantime worked away, and, for a lawyer, really hurried things up in a wonderful way, so that by the time Dorothy's twenty-first birthday came everything was settled, and he was ready to hand over to her the money to which she was entitled under her aunt's will. Mr. Marks therefore wrote to her, telling her that he was ready to hand over to Barbara the sum of one hundred pounds; to her, Dorothy, a sum of thirteen hundred and forty-five

pounds, the sum left over and above after all expenses had been paid. He asked her also when she and Barbara would be able to meet him and Mr. Stevenson, the executor of Miss Dimsdale's will.

Dorothy replied at once that she would be in London two days later, and if it suited them both would meet them there—would he write to Morley's Hotel, to say if that would be convenient? And eventually they did meet at Morley's Hotel, and Dorothy and Barbara signed the necessary papers, heard the necessary explanations, and from that moment were absolutely free of all connection with Graveleigh for ever, if they so wished.

"You will put that cheque into a proper bank," said Mr. Marks to Dorothy.

"Yes," Dorothy answered, "it will go to the bank before three o'clock."

"And remember, if at any time there is any little matter that I can do for you or any advice I can give you, you can write to me as a friend, and I will always do my best for you," the old lawyer said.

"Thank you so much," cried Dorothy, pressing his hand affectionately.

The old man blinked his eyes a little, patted her shoulder and coughed, and then took himself rather noisily away with a kindly hand-shake to Barbara. Then it was David's turn to say good-bye, and he stood, poor David, holding her hand in his and looking hard at her, as if he was trying to impress her features upon his memory.

"I wanted to tell you, Dorothy," he said huskily "that I bought the old cobs as you wished, and they will have an easy berth in my stable as long as they

live. And I wanted to tell you, too, that I meant every word of what I said to you the day after Miss Dimsdale died: if ever you want me you have only to say a single word and I shall come."

"You are very good, David," said she, with trembling lips.

"I don't know what you are going to do or what your plans are," he went on, "but I hope you will be happy, and that God will bless you, wherever you are and whatever you do," and then he bent down and kissed her little slender hands, and without looking at her again, rushed out of the room.

Poor Dorothy fell sobbing into Barbara's arms. "Oh! Barbara, it is all so dreadful; it brings it all back again," she wailed.

"Nay, nay, my dearie, think of what's going to be to-morrow," Barbara murmured tenderly. "Don't grieve like this, my dearie; don't, now."

"But I can't help grieving a little, Barbara," Dorothy cried impatiently. "You forget that they have been all my life to me until just now. And Auntie wanted me to marry David almost until the last, and though I couldn't do that, he has been very kind and generous to me, and I hate not to be friends with him, after all. And then I meant to tell him a little about Elsie Carrington, and then each time I've seen him I have felt so miserable and so guilty, Barbara, that I could have cried of shame. Yes, indeed I could."

"Well, but, my dearie, it's over now, and David Stevenson would not have been satisfied to have you friends with him. Men never do when they want love. And, after all, it wasn't your fault that you

never liked David : I never could abide him myself and I'm sure, Miss Dorothy dear, that you detested him long enough before you ever set eyes on Mr. Harris."

"But Auntie——" Dorothy sobbed.

"I'm sure the dear mistress was the last one in all the world to have knowingly made you miserable about David Stevenson or any other gentleman on earth," Barbara answered positively. "But what did you want to tell him about Miss Carrington, dearie ?"

"Elsie always liked him," Dorothy began, when the old servant interrupted her.

"Nay, now, Miss Dorothy, take my advice and don't you be meddling between David Stevenson and Miss Carrington. They wouldn't either of them thank you for it if they knew it, and if you was to mention her name even it would set Mr. David against her for ever. Never you trouble your head about him, he's no worse off than he's always been—better, in fact, for he is richer now than before the Hall fell to him. I dare say he'll feel bad about you for a bit, but remember, Miss Dorothy, that it's harder to lose what you have than what you haven't got and never had."

"Perhaps you are right, Barbara," said Dorothy, a little comforted.

"Ay, I am right there," said Barbara, wisely.

Well, the next day Dick Aylmer came up from Colchester with all the delight of long leave before him, and in the wildest and most joyous spirits, so that Dorothy was fairly infected by his gaiety. That evening he took her and Barbara to dine at

Simpson's, and then to a theatre to finish up the evening. And the morning following that, Dorothy, dressed in a quiet grey gown with her silver belt around her waist, got into a cab with the old servant, and drove to the church where their banns had been "cried," and there they met Dick, and the two were made man and wife.

It was a very quiet and solemn wedding in the gloomy empty church, with its dark frowning galleries and its long echoing aisles, down which their voices seemed to travel as into the ages of eternity. There were only Barbara and the clerk besides the bride and groom, and a couple of young girls who had been attracted by the sight of Dorothy's pretty grey gown to go in and see the wedding.

And then when the short ceremony was over—and oh! what a lifetime of mischief a clergyman can do in twenty minutes—Dick kissed his wife, and then Dorothy kissed Barbara, and they all went in to sign the registers.

"You'll have your lines, Miss Dorothy," urged Barbara.

"No, they are safe enough here," Dorothy replied.

"But I would have them, my dear," Barbara entreated in a whisper.

"Yes, we will have our lines," said Dick: he would have agreed to carry the church along if it would have given them pleasure, he was so happy just then.

And then they went off to Dick's hotel, where they had a champagne lunch in a private room, and Dick drank to his bride's health, and Dorothy drank to his,

and Barbara drank to them both and then insisted that the wine had got into her head.

And after that they parted for a short time, Dorothy and Barbara going off to Morley's to fetch their luggage and pay their bill, and meeting Dick again with his belongings at Victoria Station, where they parted in earnest from Barbara, who was going to spend the two months with various friends and relations in or around London.

"And, Barbara, this will keep you going till we get back," said Dick, slipping twenty pounds into her hand.

"But, Mr. Harris," cried Barbara, feeling that there were four notes, "it's too much; I shan't need it."

"Take it while you can get it, Barbara," he laughed; "I dare say we shall be desperately hard up by the time we get back again," and then the train began to move, and he pushed her hand back. "Good-bye, you have the address: Mrs. Harris will write every week," and then the train had slipped away beyond speaking distance, and Dorothy was obliged to draw her head within the window.

"Poor old Barbara!" she cried.

Dick caught hold of her hand. "My darling, I have got you all to myself at last," he murmured passionately.

They were soon away from London and off to Dover, for Dick had foreign leave, and they had agreed to spend the next two months by the sunny shores of the Mediterranean, where Dorothy would learn to forget the sorrowful parting with her old home, and they would seek the lesser towns, where

they would be likely to meet few or none of Dick's friends, living a happy, lazy, simple life in which they would be all the world to each other without a thought beside—"not sorry to leave behind the beaten road with its dust and heat."

CHAPTER VIII.

SIX MONTHS AFTER.

SIX months had gone by—six glorious and blissfully happy months, during which Mr. and Mrs. Harris kept their secret well, and Dick was all the world to his wife Dorothy.

During two of these months they remained abroad, living in the smaller towns on the Riviera, seeking no interests beyond themselves, but leading a quiet, peaceful life of love, of which neither had become the least weary when Dick's leave was up and it was time for him to go back to his duty.

Now, as the 43rd were still quartered at Colchester, it became a question of some importance for them to decide where Dorothy should take up her abode after this. Colchester or its immediate neighbourhood was, of course, an impossibility, as her whereabouts might at any moment be discovered, and also Dick's real name. Dick suggested that she might go to Chelmsford and take rooms there for the time; but Dorothy had stayed more than once in that sleepy little town, and it was therefore almost as impossible as Colchester itself. So finally they agreed that there was no place in the world like London in which to hide oneself and have a good time all the same, and therefore they came back to town during the last week of Dick's leave, and they took a little

flat in Kensington, just where Dorothy and Barbara could get on very comfortably without any other servant, and yet could be near to good shops and a tolerably lively street.

"I'm afraid you'll be awfully dull, darling," he said to her when they had taken possession, and his last evening had come, "because, of course, you won't know any one, and you are not at all likely to get to know people."

"I shall have Barbara," said Dorothy, smiling bravely.

"Yes, you'll have Barbara, but Barbara won't be much company for you," he answered. "I do hate all this concealment. I hate leaving you at all, and I hate having to live as it were on the sly, and I'm afraid always that some one you know or one of the fellows will be seeing you, and that they may get hold of a wrong idea altogether, and—and—I sometimes feel as if I should like to kill that old savage at Aylmer's Field."

"But, Dick dear, nobody will see me, and if they do they will think I am Dorothy Strode still. Remember, I don't know many people in all the world, and none of your officers know me at all, and if they even happened to see me with you they wouldn't think anything of it. Really, I wouldn't worry about *that* if I were you, dearest, and as for my being dull—why, I am never dull. I never have been used to having more than one person at a time —Auntie all my life, and now you. I shall get on splendidly with Barbara, and I shall always be able to look forward to the days when you will be coming home."

"And I shall come like a bird whenever I get the ghost of a chance," he cried tenderly.

"And I," cried Dorothy, "am going to make a study of gowns. I have always been used to making my ordinary gowns, and I shall have lots of time, and I am going to begin as soon as you are gone. I am going to make myself some beautiful tea-gowns; they will make me look married and dignified—they will make you respect me, sir."

"But you don't want to look married and dignified," he cried, half alarmed. "Suppose you meet some one you know, and——"

"I shall not be wearing a tea-gown, Dick," cried Dorothy, with a gay laugh.

"Ah! no, no, of course not," he answered, relieved. "All the same, though, did you not tell me the other day that you had a cousin somewhere or other?"

"Oh, Esther! Yes, but she," carelessly, "is in Egypt."

"But, my dear child, she won't be in Egypt always," he rejoined; "and if she comes back to London, which she is sure to do——"

"By no means, Dick," interrupted Dorothy, quietly. "Esther is just as likely to go off for the summer to New Zealand or Finland as to come to London. And she would not specially hunt me up if she did come here. She is beautiful, and rich, and very independent in her mind, but she is six years older than I am, and thinks very little of family ties. In any case, supposing that I met her in London to-morrow, she would certainly not try to pry into my affairs, and even if I had your leave to

tell her part of the truth, she is perfectly safe. I assure you that you need never worry yourself for a single moment about my cousin Esther."

So Dick was pacified, and the following day went off to Colchester—not in a very happy frame of mind, all the same. "I hate leaving you, Dolly," he said vexedly. "I hate it. I've a good mind to throw up my commission and trust to Fate and the old savage."

"Dick, Dick!" she cried, "how can you be so foolish? Supposing that 'the old savage' did turn round on you and stopped your allowance, where would you be then? If you are in the army you have always the chance of going to India, and I don't know that I would not rather be in India as Mrs. Aylmer than have these dreadful partings here."

"No, no," he cried hastily, "I couldn't take you out there. I've always had a sort of horror of the East, and I would do anything to avoid running any such risk."

So he went away, with a lump in his throat which made him glad that he was safe in a cab, leaving Dorothy to face the next week by herself—that is to say, except for Barbara, who was jubilant at having got her long holiday over and delighted to be at work again.

To Dorothy, Barbara at this time was a wonderful study, of which she was never tired. For Barbara had been born and bred in the country, and had lived more years at Graveleigh Hall than Dorothy could remember, and her comments on Town people and Town ways were something more than amusing.

"Ah! they did things in a queer sort of fashion at Holloway. My cousin Joe lives at Holloway—you know, Miss Dorothy—he's a plumber in quite a large way of business, and has money in the bank and two children at boarding-school learning French and music and Heaven knows what beside. Mrs. Joe used to go out every Saturday night to get her stores in for the week, as she always said—for Sunday, I used to *think*. Never did I see such marketings! A quarter of a pound of butter and four fresh eggs. She regular prided herself on those fresh eggs. 'My dear,' said I one night to her, 'them eggs have been laid at least a week, and I doubt if I should be far out if I went as far as ten days.'

"'You see, Barbara,' says she, 'you've been used to a country life, with new-laid eggs, and gallons of milk and butter by the stone, and I dare say you feel a bit pinched-like here. But if I'd let myself go in butter and lived on new-laid eggs at twopence-ha'-penny each—well, all I can say is, I should have had to rest content without any boarding-schools or anything put by in the bank.'

"I don't say, Miss Dorothy—Mrs. Harris, Ma'am, I should say," Barbara went on, in her wisest tones—"that I should wish to go against my cousin Joe's wife in that respect—a thrifty wife is a crown of gold to a man that has to work for a living; but at eggs that have never seen a hen for nearly a fortnight, I do draw the line—to call 'em fresh, that is."

But although on most evenings Dorothy used to tell the old servant to bring her sewing and come

and sit with her in the pretty little drawing-room, it must be confessed that at this time she found her life dreadfully dull, and as each day went by she seemed to miss Dick in her daily life more and more. For though she had been used to a quiet country home and a quiet country existence there had always been plenty to interest her. Miss Dimsdale, if somewhat old-fashioned in her ideas and strict in her notions, had been both tender and indulgent to her little orphan niece, and had, moreover, always been a clever and capable woman with whom to associate. Then about a country house there are always so many different points of interest. Either the moles have worked at last from the meadow under the hedge and below the very best bit of the velvet lawn which is the very pride and delight of your eyes, or the rats have suddenly acquired a pert measure of audacity and have scraped and bitten a new hole in the corn-bin or the newly filled potato-bags, or have gone further and found their way into the principal pantry and created a regular stampede among your servants. Or perhaps you catch one of the sinners in a new trap which cost five-and-sixpence, and when you go to see its wicked, hoary old occupant, you feel that if it never catches another, this one is well worth the money. Or if traps and other means, consisting of horribly smelling poisons suggestive of the infernal regions, fail you, perhaps you have the professional rat-catcher up from the village with his box of sinuous red-eyed ferrets, and then you have your revenge on the rats.

There is no end to the interest which hourly

crop up out of the unexpected in a country life. Perhaps the speckled hen starts laying, or she shows unmistakable signs of a stronger instinct of maternity than usual. Or one of the cobs casts a shoe, or a wind gets up in the night and tears a large branch off the great weeping-willow which shelters the most easterly corner of your garden, where the wind sweeps up the keenest, straight from the great North Sea. Or maybe the corner of the shrubbery, where the mushrooms have always grown, nobody ever knew why, has suddenly bloomed out with broad pinkish fungi, and you feel as if you had found a fortune, although you know perfectly well that the market value of what you have discovered is not, at the outside, more than threepence. Still, that does not lessen your pleasure in the least, and you carry them indoors and present them to every member of your household, your visitors if you have any, your family, and finally to your cook, as if—well, as if you were a second Columbus and had discovered a new America.

Then in the country you are a neighbour of everybody's! If you live as Dorothy Strode had been used to live all her life, you know why Janet Wenham was not at church on Sunday, and why Elizabeth Middleham's girl left that nice place at Whittington, and how Elizabeth Middleham cried for days over it, and her girl's intention to take service in London and see life. And you know all about it when Mrs. Jones has her mauve dinner-gown dyed chestnut-brown, and how it is that the Rectory curtains keep clean year after year, although white silk with a delicately tinted stripe would be ruined in three

months in some houses. Yes, you know everything about everybody in the country, almost without knowing why you know it.

But in Town, in London-town, it is all so different. It is true that when you get known in London, the gossiping is nearly as bad as if you were the centre of a small village set; but to a girl situated as Dorothy was, London is a social blank. She knew nobody, and nobody knew her. She did not want to know any one, and apparently the inhabitants of the Metropolis returned the compliment. Yet nevertheless it was terribly dull. Her pretty little flat was on the ground floor of the block of buildings which was dignified with the name of Palace Mansions, so she had people above and people below her. But Dorothy knew them not. There was a sweet-faced lady on the first floor immediately above her, a lady who dressed well and had a sweet-faced little child with her sometimes, and Dorothy fairly yearned over her and longed to say "Good morning" when they met in the common hall of the Mansion. But the sweet-faced lady did not know the exact standing of Mrs. Harris who lived at No. 4, and in her dread of even rubbing elbows with "a person" she resolutely made her eyes stone and her lips steel whenever she saw the slight girlish figure approaching her.

Then there was a lady at No. 2—that was the basement, a sort of Welbeck Abbey in miniature. She, being a stout and buxom widow whose grandchildren came running in at all times from a house on the other side of the High Street, might have ventured a kindly word even to "a person;" but she

never did. No, on the contrary, whenever she came across poor Dorothy she invariably sniffed, which was rude, to say the least of it.

Then there was an old gentleman who walked up and down in front of her windows every morning from half-past nine to ten o'clock, and again every afternoon from half-past two to three. He looked like an old General, and Dorothy felt quite friendly towards him—because he belonged to her darling Dick's profession. But even an old General can get monotonous in time, particularly when he does the same things day after day—and this one always did. After his early morning constitutional, he invariably went in to his house and was seen no more until he came out to do his half-hour of regular tramping again at half-past two. But after his second dose he always looked at his watch when an adjacent clock struck the hour, and then shook himself together and toddled off as if he were going to Town—going to his club, Dorothy thought.

But oh! dear, dear, it was all dreadfully slow, and before she had been a month in her new home Dorothy was pining, pining for some woman-friend to talk to, to confide in, to be friends with.

Of course, to set off against this, there were the gay and glorious times when Dick came home, sometimes only between afternoon parade and morning stables, which meant a little dinner somewhere, a theatre after it, and a wild scramble and rush to catch a train leaving Liverpool Street at some unearthly hour in the morning. At other times, however, Dick managed to squeeze a two-days' leave out of his Colonel, and then Dorothy felt—ay, and

said, poor child—that life was worth living, and that she would not change her lot for that of any other woman in all the wide world.

So, poor child, her life slipped by in a continual change from grave to gay, with bright spots of deepest and tenderest love set in a large surface of unutterable dullness and wearying depression.

"I wonder," she said one day to Dick, "whether, when we are able to be always together, you will get tired of me and if I shall bore you?"

"No," said Dick, promptly.

"You really think not?" eagerly.

"I don't think at all," he said tenderly, "because I am sure of it. What makes you ask me that, dearest? Have I ever looked bored or as if I was tired of you?"

"Oh! no, Dick, no!" she burst out; "only you are so good and kind to me, and it seems so wonderful that you, who have been in the world all your life, should take so much trouble for a little nobody like me—I mean that I know nothing, how should I, after living all my life at Graveleigh?"

Dick laughed aloud at the earnestness of her face and tone.

"My darling," he said, holding her close to his heart, "I have been no more kind and tender to you than you have been to me. You don't set half enough value on your dear self, the most precious self to me in all the world. Believe me, a man does not care so much what his wife knows as what she *is*—and you forget what I always remember, that you might have liked the other fellow best, and you didn't."

"The other fellow," Dorothy faltered. "You mean David Stevenson."

"Yes, I mean David Stevenson," Dick answered. "Many a girl would have taken him before a poor pauper devil, who had to ask his wife to live *incog.* in a poor little hole like this. Do you know, I went round to have a look at Stevenson's place, Holroyd, the other day, and when I saw it—shall I tell you what I did, my sweetheart?"

"Yes," answered Dorothy, in a whisper.

"I went round to the churchyard where she lies, our best friend, and I thanked God and her, if she could hear me, that my dear little love had given me her pure love in exchange for mine, and that Miss Dimsdale's wishes had never been to part us. Don't hurt me again by asking me doubting questions, my darling. Don't, Dorothy, don't, my dear."

"Dick, Dick," Dorothy cried, "I never will. I love you, love you, love you!"

"And you will always love me?" teasingly.

"Oh, Dick!" reproachfully.

"Even when——?"

Dorothy blushed, but she put her arm round his neck, and drew his mouth down to hers. "I shall always love you best of all, Dick," she said; "and however much I may love the child, I shall love it most because of you."

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED APPOINTMENT.

ABOUT two months after this a sort of avalanche fell upon the little household in Palace Mansions. It took the form of a letter from Lord Aylmer, the old savage at Aylmer's Field, and as Dick in his first surprise exclaimed, "Now, who the devil was to expect the old savage would be up to this sort of game?"

It began by assuring his nephew that he was enjoying the very best of health, that he had not had a touch of gout for something over three months, but that her ladyship was in exceedingly queer health—that she was, indeed, thoroughly out of sorts, and at present giving both himself and her medical adviser cause for the gravest anxiety. Then he went on to say that he had just had a visit of nearly a week from his old friend Barry Boynton—"That's Lord Skevversleigh," said Dick, as he read the letter aloud—and that Barry Boynton had just been appointed Governor-General of Madras, and that as he—"the old savage"—felt his nephew could not lose by advancement in his profession, whether he ever happened to come in for the Aylmer title or not, he had put in a good word for him with his old friend, with the result that Barry Boynton had promised to appoint him as his military secretary.

"But, Dick," Dorothy cried, "that means India."

"Not a bit of it, my darling," Dick cried; "I'll see the old savage at perdition before I accept it. I only go to India on one condition—that I go as a free man; that is, with you as my acknowledged wife."

Then they read the letter over again, and made their comments upon it—she with her sweet face pressed against his cheek, he with his arm close about her waist.

"The amount of delicate information he conveys is really remarkable," Dick laughed. Dick, by-the-bye, was on a ten-days' leave, and was jovial and inclined to view the whole world through rose-coloured glasses in consequence: "that is to let me know that I needn't expect to step into his shoes for many a day yet. Bless me, if he knew how little I care about it, one way or the other."

"Nor I," Dorothy chimed in; "except—except that we should always be together then, Dick," with a soft touch of yearning in her voice.

"But we are always together in heart, my dearest," cried Dick, fondly. "And my lady's health is causing him the gravest anxiety—h'm! We may take *that* with a grain of salt. Gravest anxiety! Why, if my lady was lying at death's door that old savage wouldn't be anxious, unless for fear that she should get better. However, as they are in Town I must go and inquire after her ladyship. She's a hard nail enough, but she has always been good to me in her way, and she's worth a thousand of him any day. And then I can tell the old savage that he

may use his influence with his dear old friend Barry Boynton for somebody else."

"But you won't do anything rash, Dick?" Dorothy cried.

"Certainly not—why should I? But I shall tell him I have no fancy for India, and that I'd rather stop at home."

"But supposing that he says no," said Dorothy, who in her heart regarded Dick's "old savage" as an all-powerful being who had it in his power to make or mar her very existence.

"Oh, I think he will hardly insist, one way or the other," he answered easily. "Anyway, I must go and be civil to my lady, who isn't half a bad sort, and gently intimate my decision to my lord."

"When will you go, Dick?" Dorothy asked.

"To-day, I think, dearest," he replied; "just after lunch will be a good time. The savage is never quite so savage after a meal as at any other time."

A strange and sickly faintness began to creep over Dorothy, a dull and indefinable sense of foreboding rose in her heart, and threatened to suffocate her. "Shall you be long there?" she faltered.

"Well, if I am," returned Dick, with a laugh, "it will be a new experience for my delightful uncle, for I never stopped a single minute longer in his house than I could help, since I can remember."

Then he happened—attracted by her silence, and the absence of the sweet laugh which generally echoed his—to turn and look at her. The next moment he had caught her in his arms, and was kissing her as a man only kisses the one woman that he loves in all the world.

"My love, my love," he cried, "my dear, sweet little love, don't look like that. What is it you fear? Not that I shall ever change toward you, or be different in any way, so far as you are concerned?"

"They are your people," she faltered, "and——"

"My people!" he echoed contemptuously. "Yes, so they are; but you—you are my life—my very soul—the light of my eyes; why, you are *myself*. Why, to put my love and care for you in comparison for one instant with what I feel for all my people together, would be too funny for words, if you were not distressed about it. But when I see you look like that, darling, it hurts me so awfully—it cuts me up, so that I can hardly talk or think sensibly. My dear little love, there is nobody in all the wide world that I could ever put beside you, or ever shall."

"You are sure?" she cried.

"I am quite sure," he answered, looking her straight and true in the eyes. "And now, my dearest, it is half-past eleven; let me take you out for a turn before lunch-time."

He always found it an easy matter to comfort and re-assure the little wife who loved him so dearly, and although, by living so much alone and without proper companionship, she was apt to brood over the circumstances of her life, and to conjure up all sorts of gloomy fancies and dread shadows which might come to pass at some future time, these mists always yielded before the irresistible sunshine of his love, and they were happier, if possible, than they had been aforetime.

In his innermost heart, however, Dick was not so easy about his approaching interview with Lord

Aylmer as he made Dorothy believe; and he knocked at the door of the old savage's town house with rather a quaking heart, and something of the vague dread which he had coaxed and soothed away from his wife's tender heart.

Yes, Lord Aylmer was at home, and her ladyship also; and the servant, having no special orders about Mr. Aylmer, at once showed him into a pretty little room off the smallest of the two drawing-rooms, and told him that he would inform her ladyship of his presence. And in less than three minutes, Lady Aylmer came.

"My dear Dick," she said, "I am most pleased to see you. I did not know that you were in town. Is it true that Lord Skevversleigh has made you his military secretary? I quite thought you had set your face against India at any price."

Dick Aylmer was so surprised that he sat staring at his uncle's wife in speechless surprise. She noticed his look, and asked with a laugh, "What is the matter, Dick? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost, Lady Aylmer," he said, recovering himself; "but I certainly expected to see more of a ghost than you are at this moment."

"Why, how do you mean?"

"I had a letter from Lord Aylmer this morning, and he said that you were ill."

"Ill! I?" she echoed. "Nonsense, you must have mistaken him. I was never better in my life."

"I couldn't possibly mistake him," said Dick, firmly. "However, I'll show you the letter, there is nothing at all private in it."

So Lady Aylmer took the letter and read it.

"H'm," she muttered. "I am afraid the wish is father to the thought, my dear boy," she said drily. "It's true I had a touch of toothache or neuralgia about a week ago, entirely because he was consumed with gout—though, mind, he declares stoutly that he hasn't had gout for more than three months—and persisted in having the window open all the way from Leicester. But as for my health or any one's health but his own giving him a moment's anxiety—why, the idea is ludicrous, simply ludicrous. The gravest anxiety, indeed. H'm! If I was lying at the point of death his lordship might be anxious till the breath was out of my body."

"That was just what I said to—to myself," said Dick, who had been on the very point of uttering his wife's name. "However, Lady Aylmer, I am very glad to find that you are all right and in good health."

"Thank you, Dick," she replied, holding out her hand to him; then, after a moment's silence, she suddenly burst out, "Dick, what is he after?"

"Lord Aylmer? I don't know," Dick answered.

"He is after something, I've known it for weeks, but I cannot make out what," Lady Aylmer went on. "First, by his persistence that he has not got the gout. I have been married to him a great many years, but I never knew him deliberately deny himself the pleasure of gloating over his gout before. He must mean something by it. I thought, of course," she went on, with a nonchalant air, "that there was somebody else. But his anxiety about my health, and his desire to pack you off to India, where he knows you don't want to go, make one think

differently. In any case, go to the library and see him, and whatever you do, my dearest boy, *don't* irritate him. Don't contradict him; tell him at once that you don't want to go to India—that is, if you really don't want to do so; but if he insists, take my most serious advice and temporise—put the time on anyhow—tell him you must have a week in which to consider the idea."

"Yes, I'll do that," said Dick, rising.

"Stay, we had better send to him first," said Lady Aylmer, touching the button of the bell. "Yes. Jenkins, tell Lord Aylmer that Mr. Aylmer is here and wishes to see him."

"Best to treat him in the imperial way that satisfies him," said her ladyship to Dick, as the man closed the door behind him. "I always do it when I want to make him a little more human than usual. I don't do it at other times, because he is eminently a person with whom familiarity breeds contempt."

Dick laughed outright. "Very well, I will be most careful," he replied; then added, "It's awfully good of you to give me a good tip out of your experience. I have never been able to hit it off with his lordship yet. Perhaps I shall be more fortunate this time."

"You may be. You know, of course, Dick, that it was your steady refusal to marry Mary Annandale that set him so thoroughly against you."

"Mary Annandale's money," corrected Dick.

"Ah! yes, it is the same thing," carelessly.

"But I don't believe Mary Annandale would have had me," Dick declared.

"Perhaps not. Still, you never gave her a chance, did you? Now, of course, it is too late."

"Very much too late," returned Dick, promptly, and grinning good-humouredly at the remembrance of how very much too late it was for him to build up the fortunes of the house of Aylmer by means of a rich wife.

He turned as the door opened again. "His lordship will be pleased to see you in the library, Sir," said Jenkins.

"I will come," said Dick.

"And good luck go with you," said Lady Aylmer kindly, as he went. "Come back and tell me how you get on."

Poor Dick! he did not get on very well. He found Lord Aylmer sitting in a big chair in the library, looking ominously bland.

"Good morning, Sir," said Dick.

"Oh, good morning, Dick; sit down, my boy," rejoined Lord Aylmer, quite tenderly.

Dick gave himself up for lost at once, but he sat down and waited for "the old savage" to go on with the conversation. For a minute or so Lord Aylmer did not speak; he moved his left foot uneasily, in a way distinctly suggestive of gouty twinges, and fidgeted a little with his rings and his finger-nails.

"You got my letter," he remarked at last.

"Yes, I did, Sir; that brought me here," Dick answered.

"Ah, that's all right," said the old lord, in a self-satisfied tone. "Great piece of luck for you, my boy, great piece of luck. I couldn't have got it for any one else; in fact, I rather fancy Barry Boynton

had somebody else in his eye, though, of course, he couldn't very well refuse me. Still, of course, I had to tell him you were devilish anxious for the appointment."

"But I'm not devilish anxious for the appointment," Dick broke in at last. "I'm not anxious for it at all."

For a minute or two the old man looked at him in profound amazement. "Damme, Sir, do you mean to say you're going to turn round on me after all the trouble I've taken for you? Damme, Sir, do you mean to tell me that?"

"Not exactly that," answered Dick, still keeping Lady Aylmer's advice in his mind, "but——"

"Then what do you mean, Sir?" roared the old man, losing his temper altogether.

"I mean this," said Dick, firmly: "up to now I have, as you know, always set my face against going to India. I hate and loath the very idea of it. England is good enough for me, and I went into the 43rd on purpose that I might not have to go to India, or lose a lot of seniority. What I want to know is this—What has made you take a lot of trouble, and put yourself under an obligation to Lord Skevversleigh, in order to bring about what you know would be utterly distasteful to me?"

Lord Aylmer looked at Dick as if words had failed him, but presently he found his tongue and used it freely. "Damme, Sir," he roared, "do you mean to accuse me of any sneaking, second-hand motives? 'Pon my soul, Sir, I've a good mind to write to Lord Skevversleigh and ask him to consider the appointment refused. But stay," as he saw by Dick's face that this would be the most desirable course he could

take, "I will do no such thing. Damme, Sir, I've had about enough of your airs and graces. Hark you, and mark what I say! To India you go, without another word; or I cut off your allowance from this day week, every penny of it. As you yourself said just now, I go to a lot of trouble for you, put myself under a great obligation to a friend in order to serve you, and all the return I get for it is, that you get on your high horse and accuse me of second-hand motives. Damme, Sir, it's intolerable—simply intolerable. And I suppose you think I don't know *why* you want to shirk a year or two in India, eh?"

"I don't understand you, Sir," said Dick, with icy civility.

"No, no, of course not. And you think I didn't see you the other night at the Criterion, and mopping your eyes over 'David Garrick' afterwards. Bah! you must think I'm a fool."

For a moment Dick was startled, but he did not show it by his manner in the least. "Well, Sir," he said quietly, "I have never been in the habit of asking your permission to take a lady to a theatre."

"No," the old savage snarled in return; "nor when you wanted to start housekeeping in Palace Mansions either."

"No, Sir," said Dick, firmly; "nor when I wanted to start housekeeping either."

"And that was why you refused to marry Mary Annandale?" Lord Aylmer snapped.

"Not at all. I refused to ask Miss Annandale to marry me because I did not care about Miss Annandale."

"Bah!" grunted the old man, in a fury. "I

suppose you believe in all that rot about marrying for love."

"Most certainly I do."

"And you mean to do it?"

"I don't mean to marry anybody at present," said Dick coolly. He felt more of a sneak than he had ever felt in all his life to leave the old man in his belief that his dear little Dorothy was less to him than she was, yet he knew that for her sake, for the sake of her actual bodily welfare, he could not afford to have an open declaration of war just then. Sneak or no sneak, he must manage to put the time on a little until the child had come, and all was well with Dorothy.

Lord Aylmer rose from his chair in a rage of tottering fury. "Listen to me, Sir," he thundered. "It may be all very pretty and idyllic and all that, but you wouldn't marry the woman I chose for you, and now you shall go to India to pay for it. It's no use you thinking you have any choice in the matter—you haven't. I've had enough of your excuses, and your shilly-shallying, and all your puling sentimentality, love, and all the rest of it. What do you want with love?"

"I believe you married for love yourself, Sir," suggested Dick, in his mildest tones.

"And repented it before three months had gone over my head, and have gone on repenting ever since," the old man snarled. "Damme, Sir, that woman is never tired of throwing it at me. If I'd married her for her money, she couldn't very well have thrown that at me—been a fool if she had."

There was a moment's silence, then the old Lord

went on again, "Look here, Dick, you've got to make up your mind to one thing—I mean you to go to India, so you may as well go with a good grace."

"I'll think it over," said Dick.

"I want an answer now," irritably.

"That's impossible, Sir, unless you like to take no for an answer, right away," Dick replied firmly.

"I suppose you want to talk the matter over with the young lady in Palace Mansions," said the old Lord, in his most savage tones.

"I don't think that would interest you, whether I did or not," said Dick, coldly; "but one thing is very certain, which is that I am not going to India without thinking the whys and wherefores thoroughly over. I will come again on Friday, and tell you my intentions."

"And you'll bear in mind that a refusal of the appointment cuts off your allowance at once."

"I will bear everything in mind," said Dick, steadily; and then he shut the door, leaving the old man alone.

"Well?" cried Lady Aylmer, when he looked in to the little boudoir again. "How did you get on?"

"We didn't get on at all," Dick answered. "He means me to go to India by hook or by crook."

"And I wonder," said my lady thoughtfully, "what it is that he has in his mind. No good, I'm afraid."

CHAPTER X.

DINNA FORGET.

AFTER this interview it was Dick's pleasant task to go home and tell the news to his wife. It had to be done; it was useless his trying to shirk it, because Dorothy knew why and where he had gone, and was too eager to hear the result of his visit to his uncle to let him even light a cigarette in peace, until she had heard all that there was to hear; in fact, as soon as he put his key into the door she flew out to meet him. "Dick, is it good news?" she cried eagerly.

Now Dick could not honestly say that it was good news, but then he did not wish to tell her how bad it was all at once; so he gently prevaricated, kissed her with even more than his usual tenderness, and asked her if she had been very dull without him, and whether he had been too long away.

His well-meaning prevarication had exactly the opposite effect to that which he had intended. Dorothy's sensitive heart went down to zero at once, and the corners of her sweet lips drooped ominously. "Oh! Dick, it is bad news," she said mournfully, "and you are trying to hide it from me."

"No, no. I am not," he said hurriedly. "But there's no need to tell all our private affairs out here for everybody to hear."

"But there isn't any *every*body," said Dorothy; "there's only Barbara."

In spite of his anxiety, Dick burst out laughing. "Come in here, my darling," he said, drawing her towards the drawing-room; "and you shall give me a cup of tea while I tell you all about it."

"And you've not promised to go?" she asked, as she began to make the tea. "No, don't trouble, Dick dear, it is lighted, and the water will boil in two minutes."

She had a pretty little brass stand, a tray, spirit-lamp, and kettle, and with this apparatus she always made the tea herself, with much pride, and some help from Dick. It generally fell to Dick's lot to light the lamp, but to-day she was all ready for him, and had but to turn up the light a little to have the water boiling.

"There," she said, after about five minutes, and handing him a cup of tea. "Now tell me all—everything."

"Well," said Dick, finding himself thus fairly up in a corner, and unable to put off the evil moment any longer, "I went."

"Yes?" eagerly.

"And I saw her ladyship."

"Oh! and is she up?"

"Up! My dear child, Lady Aylmer is as well as I am," he answered.

Dorothy looked at him in wonder. "Oh! Dick," she cried, "but what a wicked old man!"

"Ah! I fancy it runs in the blood," said Dick, easily. "One man couldn't have so much original

sin of his own as the old savage has; it must be heredity."

"Then do you think you will tell horribly wicked stories when you are Lord Aylmer, Dick?" she asked roguishly.

"Perhaps—who knows? All the same, there is one story I shall never tell you," drawing her tenderly towards him. "I shall always be true as the gospels when I tell you that I love you better than any other woman in all the world."

Something in his voice touched the tenderest chords of her heart, and set it throbbing and beating with a sickening sensation of fear. "Dick," she said in a whisper, "is it *very* bad news that you are trying to break to me—does it mean India, after all?"

Dick looked straight into her clear eyes. "My dear little love," he said, "I am afraid it does mean India, after all; but if it does, it shall mean India for us both."

He told her everything then—how Lady Aylmer had received him, how she had openly declared that her husband had some scheme of his own to get rid of them both, how the old savage had received him, and what end their interview had come to. "But, of course," he wound up, "although I took time to consider it, my mind was made up in a moment. I shall refuse the appointment."

There was a moment's silence. "Dick dearest," said Dorothy in a quavering voice, "is it a very good thing to be a military secretary to a governor-general?"

"Oh! well—yes—it is, dear," he admitted.

"I mean, would you have refused it if you had not been married, if you had never seen me?"

"No, I don't suppose I should. I dare say I should never have bothered to get such an appointment, because, as you know, I hate the very idea of going to India, but at the same time, to be quite honest, I don't suppose I should have refused. I don't suppose any man in his senses would."

Dorothy drew her breath sharply, and for a minute or two did not speak. "Dick, darling," she said at lenthg, "it is true that you are married, but I don't see that that is any reason why you should not be in your senses too."

"What do you mean, Dorothy?" he asked quickly.

"Well, just this. Supposing that Lord Aylmer had let you refuse this appointment, and had not made himself disagreeable about your allowance, we should have to go on just as we are doing now. And, of course, Dick dear, I should like to be Mrs. Aylmer instead of Mrs. Harris, and to live with the regiment rather than in Palace Mansions; but—but, at the same time, since there is so much to be gained by it, I would just as soon be Mrs. Harris in one place as in another, if I must be Mrs. Harris at all."

Dick caught her close to him. "Dorothy, you mean——" he began.

"I mean," she ended firmly, "that I would sooner go to India as Mrs. Harris than drag you down in your profession, and put you at loggerheads with your uncle; because he is your uncle, and the head of your family, even though he is such an old savage as he is."

"But, my dear, my dear, do you know that in that case I should have to go at once?" he cried.

"Yes, I know that, Dick," she answered.

"But I can't leave you alone, just now—I can't, Dorothy," he exclaimed. "It's impossible; it would be inhuman. Why, I should be out of my mind with anxiety and distress."

"No, no—you would know that I was proud and happy to be able to do something to help you," she replied. "I would rather that you were here; but, then, I would *always* rather that you were here. *That* is not a new feeling for me. And I shall not be alone. I shall have Barbara, you know. Barbara will take care of me, and let you know exactly how I get on."

"No; I cannot let you do it," he said, when she paused.

"Yes, yes, you can, dear. Besides, it is not only ourselves that we have to think of. There is the child; and although if we go to India together, we might be able to get along pretty well by ourselves, we should not be able to afford to send the child home, if the climate was bad for it. Why, Dick dear, we should not be able to afford to come home ourselves, if we could not stand the heat."

"That is true," he admitted.

"And don't you think," she went on eagerly, "that I would rather live as I am doing now for a year or two longer than I would run the risk of seeing you die, perhaps, because we had not money to bring us home? Just think what I should feel like if we were in such a case as that."

"But, darling, you don't know—you don't realise how very different life would be out there," he urged.

"Here, very few people take the trouble to notice us, one way or another, and if they do, it does not much matter. But out there, as military secretary I should have a lot to do. I should scarcely have a moment to myself. I should not be able to go anywhere with you, and probably very seldom be able to come and see you."

"But you would be able to come sometimes," she answered, with a brave smile. "Every one knows that half a loaf is better than no bread, and if one cannot get even half a loaf, it is foolish to quarrel with the slice which keeps one from starving."

Dick's heart felt like to break. "Dorothy, Dorothy, he said, "my dear little brave unselfish wife, every word you say makes me love you a thousand times more than I did before. My dearest, I give in to anything that you wish; you shall decide everything, and I—I will give all the rest of my life to trying to make you feel that you did not throw away your love and confidence when you gave them to me."

So they arranged that Dick should accept the appointment of military secretary to Lord Skevversleigh, and that two days later he should go and see his uncle again, and tell him the decision to which he had come. Dorothy had begged him to go and see him the following day, but Dick held out firmly there. No, he would have one more day of liberty before he went over to the enemy and gave himself up.

"We will have a real happy day, darling," he said, when Dorothy had given way about imparting the news to the savage. "By-and-bye we shall have more money than opportunity of spending it together,

—let us make hay while we can. First, we will go and have a look at the shops together, and I will buy you something you can always wear till we meet again; then we will go to some good place and get a little lunch; and, afterwards, have a drive, come back here, dress, dine somewhere, and do a theatre after it. There, what do you say to that for a real happy day?"

Dorothy said that it would be delightful, and thought—well, with something like dismay, that she should never get through it all. Yet the fear of once giving way and breaking down altogether kept her up, and she went bravely through with that happy day, which afterwards lived in her mind as being one long spell of agony.

And after that she wore upon her wrist Dick's trust gift to her—a golden bangle, with two words inscribed upon it in little diamonds, which caught the light and flashed their message at her a hundred times a day—two simple words, "Dinna Forget."

CHAPTER XI.

A NEW IDEA.

LORD AYLMER was sitting alone in his library, smoking a cigarette, and wondering what answer Dick would bring him, when he thought proper to come again to give in his decision.

He was a handsome old man, not so very old in years, but aged in wickedness. A handsome man still, with aquiline features, a flushed face, and a goodly crop of white curly hair. Your first thought on looking at him was, "What a charming old gentleman!" your second, "What a pair of steely eyes!" Your third, "What a Mephistopheles!" Yes, without the shadow of a doubt, Lord Aylmer was a wicked man, with a bad heart filled to the brim, and running over with all manner of evil.

They say, you know, that women novelists always make their heroes all good, till they are as insipid as the dummies in a tailor's window; or else that they go to the other extreme, and make their villains such unmitigated villains that it is impossible to find one single ray of virtue wherewith to redeem their character from its inky pall of utter blackness. But let me tell you that if all the women-novelists who write stories in the English language were to concentrate their efforts upon the task of trying to depict the villainy of Lord Aylmer's natural depravity,

I am afraid that in the end they would have to call in the aid of their masculine *confrères* to adequately complete the portrait. For the noble lord was all bad, thoroughly bad—what up in the North countrie they call "bad, core through." Yet he had a delightful manner when he chose, and in early middle age had made a genuine love-match with a beautiful young woman at least sixteen years younger than himself—a penniless as well as a beautiful young woman, upon whom he had lavished so much love and attention that within three months of his marriage his love had burnt itself out and was as dead as any dead volcano. A few weeks later, Lord Aylmer practically separated himself from his wife, although they continued to share the same house and he appeared before the world as much as possible as if no breach had ever been opened between them.

Not by Lord Aylmer's desire, this—oh! no, but because her ladyship had never been so genuinely in love with him as he had been with her, and was, moreover, perfectly alive to the solid worldly advantages of being Lord Aylmer's wife, the mistress of Aylmer's Field and of the handsome town-house in Belgrave Square.

"Of course, I know that there are others," she said in reply to a dear friend, who thought it her duty to open this young wife's eyes, "and, of course, I know that Aylmer wants to get rid of me; but I don't mean to be got rid of, and I put up with the others because I think doing so the least of two evils. There is only one Lady Aylmer, and she is a strong and healthy young woman, who means to be Lady

Aylmer for at least fifty years longer. Yes, I know, my dear, all that you feel about it. I quite appreciate your feeling towards me. Oh, yes, it was your duty to tell me, but I am not going to cut myself out of all that makes life worth living, just to oblige a husband who has got tired of me in three months."

To this decision Lady Aylmer had from that time forward kept most rigidly. As far as her husband was concerned, nothing seemed to annoy her, and whenever she wished to do so and condescended to try to get her own way by means of a little flattery, she generally succeeded; and now that Lord Aylmer had got into the "sixties," she was simply a stately, even-tempered, iron-willed, and exceedingly healthy woman who looked as if she meant to live to be ninety.

It was partly on the subject of his wife's extreme healthiness that Lord Aylmer was thinking that morning as he smoked his cigarette and tried to assure himself that the twinges in his left foot were merely a sign of a coming shower and nothing in the world to do with gout at all. And just as a worse twinge than usual made him wince and shiver, the door opened gently and a man-servant made his appearance.

"Mr. Aylmer is here, my lord," he said. "Will your lordship see him?"

"Certainly, of course," exclaimed his lordship. "Show him here at once."

The man retired, and in a minute or two returned with Dick, who said "Good morning" to his uncle, with an air of cheerful civility.

"H'gh," grunted the old Lord, "morning. Well?"

"Well, Sir," said Dick, "I have thought the matter over, and although I have not and never have had any wish to go to India, I have decided that it will be best for me to accept the appointment you were good enough to get for me."

"Oh!—er. I'm glad you've come to your senses at last," said the old Lord, a shade more graciously. "Well, you had better go and see Barry Boynton about it—that will be the best. And then you'll have to get your affairs put in order, make your will and all that."

"I have made my will," said Dick, promptly, "although it's true I hadn't very much to make it for."

"Ah! that's good—those things ought always to be done before they are wanted. By-the-bye, Dick, are you hard up or anything of that kind? Do you want any money?"

"No, Sir, thanks. I could do with a hundred or two, of course—who couldn't? But I am not in debt or anything of that sort."

The old Lord caressed his white moustache and looked at his heir with a sort of comical wonder. "'Pon my soul," he remarked, "I can't tell how you do it."

"Eh?' said Dick, not understanding, and in fact not interested in his uncle's thoughts.

"Well, how you do it. Expensive regiment—flat in Palace Mansions—Riviera, and all the rest."

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "Well, Sir, I don't owe a penny in the world, I give you my word."

"Ah! Mrs. Harris must be a young lady of very moderate desires," said Lord Aylmer, lighting another cigarette. "Have one?"

"No, thank you, Sir," returned Dick.

"And what will become of Mrs. Harris when you are gone to India, eh?" the old man asked, with a great air of interest.

"Well, Sir," said Dick, "I always make it a rule never to talk about my friends' private affairs, even when I happen to know them."

"You won't tell me." Lord Aylmer chuckled. "Oh! very well, very well—never mind. I can take a hint as well as anybody."

"When it suits your purpose," Dick's thought ran, as he watched the handsome wicked old face.

Then he got up from his chair. "If you don't want me any longer, Sir, I will go and pay my respects to my lady. By-the-bye, I hope you are less anxious about her than you were a short time ago."

Lord Aylmer jumped up in a fury and stamped his gouty foot hard upon the floor. "Damme," he cried, "that woman is like an india-rubber ball, and as hard as nails into the bargain."

"Then she is better," said Dick, with an air of profound and anxious interest.

"Better! Damme," the old savage cried, "she's outrageously well, Sir. Damme, her healthiness is positively aggressive."

"But that must be a great relief to your mind, Sir," said Dick, with perfect gravity.

"Relief!" the other echoed, then seemed to recollect himself a little. "Ah! yes, yes, of course—to be sure. Well, go and see her. I dare say you will find her in the boudoir."

Dick felt himself dismissed with a wave of the old Lord's hand, and being never very anxious to remain

in his presence, he betook himself away, and went to find her ladyship. But Lady Aylmer was not in the house—had, in fact, been gone out some time before he reached it; so Dick jumped into a cab and went back to Palace Mansions to Dorothy, who met him with a new idea.

"Dick darling," she said, "I know that you are worrying about me, and what I shall do when you are gone, and I have thought of something."

"Yes. Have you thought that, after all, it would be safe for you to go right out and risk everything?"

"No, because you do not go till September, and by then I shall have got very near to the time. No, it is not that at all; but you will have leave until you sail, won't you?"

"Yes."

"Then might we not go to the sea for a month? I am pining for a breath of sea air, and it will be good for you too."

"That is easy enough. Where shall we go? Tenby—or would you rather be nearer to Graveleigh?"

"We could not go to any of the places near Graveleigh, Dick—I should be meeting people there."

"Yes; but we might go to Overstrand or Cromer, or go down to one of the little quiet places near Ramsgate. Why, if you like, we might even go to Ramsgate or Margate itself."

"I don't in the least care where," Dorothy replied "But what I wanted to say is this—you remember my cousin, Esther Brand?"

"I've heard you speak of her."

"Well, when you are gone, would you let me write to her and ask her to come and stay with me till I am ready to come after you? She is young and kind, and I am very fond of her, and altogether it would be very different for me than if I had nobody except Barbara."

"My dearest, you shall do exactly as you think best about that," Dick said, without hesitation. "It is a good idea, and if she is nice and won't worry you about being married in this way——"

"She won't know, dear," Dorothy cried. "I shall show her my marriage-lines, and say that you are gone and that I am going to join you as soon as I can."

"She will be sure to ask my regiment."

"Not at all. Besides, you are going out to an appointment, are you not?"

"Yes, true. Well, then, do as you think best about it," he said. "Of course, I shall be a great deal easier in my mind, and then she will be able to see you off and all that. Oh! yes, it will be a very good thing in every way."

Dorothy clapped her hands together and laughed quite joyously. "Oh! Dick dear," she cried, "I'm *so* glad you don't mind—I feel quite brave about being left now. I do wish, though, that you could see Esther. She is so tall and strong, very handsome, smooth dark hair and great dark eyes—quite a girl who ought to be called Esther or Olive. And then she has always been rich, and for five years she has been absolutely her own mistress, and has travelled about everywhere."

"Won't she think it odd that you have never written to her all this time?"

"I don't think so. Esther is not a girl who thanks you for letters unless you have something special to say."

Dick put his arm round his little wife's waist. "And you have something very, very special to tell her, haven't you?" he said tenderly, then cried with an uncontrollable burst of anguish, "Oh! my love, my love, you don't know—you will never know what it will cost me to go away and leave you just now, when you will want me most of all."

"Never mind, Dick," she said bravely—"I am not afraid."

Looking at her, he saw that she spoke the truth and only the truth—her eyes met his, clear and true, and the smile which played about her sweet mouth was not marred by any expression of the agony which she had suffered during the few previous days. A week ago she had been more Dick's sweetheart than his wife; now she was not only his wife, but had also in her eyes the proud light of motherhood—"Filled was her soul with love, and the dawn of an opening heaven."

CHAPTER XII.

ALONE.

THERE is no need for me to tell of the month which Dick and his wife passed together at a secluded little watering place on the Norfolk coast, nor of the scramble which Dick had at the last to get ready for the appointed day of sailing for the shining East. It is enough to say that after an agonised parting, he tore himself away, and Dorothy found herself left alone in the pretty flat, face to face with the sorest trial of her life.

A week before she had written to her cousin, Esther Brand, but she had had no reply. That had not surprised her much, for Esther was a restless soul, never so happy as when moving about from place to place. Apart from that, London is scarcely the place to look for rich and idle people in September, and Dorothy had addressed her letter to her cousin's bankers, knowing that it would be the surest and probably the quickest way of finding her. But when Dick was gone, Dorothy began to get very anxious for a letter from Esther, to watch for the post, and to wonder impatiently what Esther could possibly have done with herself and whether she had got her letter or not. But for several days there was still silence, and at last, just when Dorothy was beginning to despair, it came.

"Here is your letter, Miss Dorothy," cried Barbara, hurrying into the room with it.

"Oh, Barbara!" Dorothy cried excitedly.

In a moment she had torn it open and was reading it aloud to Barbara. "Oh, it is from Russia. Fancy Miss Brand being in Russia, Barbara, and she says :—

"My very dear little Dorothy,—So you are married! I can hardly believe it—indeed, since having your letter this morning, I have been saying to myself over and over again, 'Dorothy Strode is married—little Dorothy has got married,' and still I do not in the least realise it. So you are very happy, of course, and you are going to have a baby—that is almost an 'of course' also. And your husband has got a good appointment in India which he does not dare to refuse. That looks like bread-and-cheese and kisses, my dear little cousin. However, not that money makes any real difference to one's happiness, and so long as you love him and he loves you nothing else matters, money least of all. But why, my dear, have you waited so long before you told me of your new ties? I have wondered so often where you were and what had become of you, and about four months ago I wrote to the old house and had your letter returned by a horrid young man, David Stevenson, whom I disliked always beyond measure. He informed me that you had left immediately after dear Auntie's death, and that he did not know your present address. I felt a little anxious about you, but eminently relieved to find that you were evidently not going to marry that detestable young man, who is, I have no doubt, all that is good

and estimable and affluent, but whom, as I said, I have never liked.

"Well, my dear child, you must let me be godmother to the baby when it comes, that I may spend as much money over its coral and bells as I should have done over a wedding-gift to you. As for coming to you—my darling child, of course I shall come straight back, and help Barbara to make up to you for the temporary loss of your spouse. I gather from your letter that he is all that is good and kind and brave, to say nothing of being handsome and loving and true—you lucky little girl!

"Expect me when you see me, dear, which will be as soon as I can possibly get myself to London. If I were on the other side of the frontier, I could pretty nearly fix both day and time. As it is, I can only say that I will lose no time in being with you, and I will stick to you till I see you safe on board the P. and O. steamer.

"My love to Barbara—how she and I will yarn together over the old place and the old days!—and much love to you, dear little woman.

"From your always affectionate

"ESTHER."

This letter in itself was enough to put Dorothy into the wildest and gayest of spirits, and Barbara was almost as much delighted; for, truth to tell, the old servant had looked forward with no little dismay to the prospect of supporting her loved young mistress through her hour of loneliness and trial, and was therefore greatly relieved to find that the responsibilities of the situation would fall upon the strong

and capable shoulders of Miss Esther Brand instead of lying upon her own weaker ones.

"It is so good and sweet and dear of Esther," Dorothy repeated, over and over again. "Just like her to throw everything else aside on the chance of being able to do a good turn to some one in need. Now I don't feel half so nervous as I did."

"Nor I," echoed Barbara, speaking out of her very heart; then she added with a significant smile, "Miss Esther never could abide David Stevenson—neither could I."

Dorothy could not help laughing. "Ah! I think you were all just a little hard on David. I didn't want to be Mrs. David, it is true. But apart from that, I don't see that there was so much amiss with him."

"H'm!" remarked Barbara, with another sniff, "perhaps not. But for all that, Miss Dorothy—Ma'am, I should say—David Stevenson was a mean boy, and I never could abide meanness in man, woman, nor child."

"He was most generous to me," said Dorothy, with a sigh.

"Yes, to serve his own ends," said Barbara sharply. "You may take such generosity as that for me. Not that I was speaking of that, Ma'am, for I wasn't, but of the time when David was a boy—a horrid boy, who thought nothing of stealing the best apples and letting another take the blame of it."

"Oh, Barbara! Barbara!" cried Dorothy, "you've got hold of a wrong story. Why, I know that once when David stole some of Auntie's apples, and young

Tom Merriman got the blame, David came and told Auntie himself."

"Yes; and for why?" demanded Barbara, with uncompromising sternness. "Because I happened to have caught the young limb at it and collared him before he could get away. 'You are stealing Miss Dimsdale's apples, David Stevenson,' I said, laying hold of him sudden-like; 'and you stole them other apples that Tom Merriman has been sacked for.' 'And what's that to you, you old sneak?' he asked. Sneak or no sneak,' said I, 'you'll turn out your pockets to me, my fine gentleman; and you'll go straight up to the house and you'll tell Miss Dimsdale that it was you stole the apples last week, and then you'll go and ask Tom Merriman's pardon for having let him lie under your fault.' 'That I shan't,' says he. 'Then,' says I, 'I just walks you right off to Miss Dimsdale, and she'll see you with your pockets full, red-handed as you are. No,' says I, 'it's no use to struggle. I've got you safe by the arms, and so I mean to keep you, whether you like it or not. And if once Miss Dimsdale knows the truth, do you know what she'll do, David Stevenson?' says I. 'No,' says he, sulkily. 'What?' 'She'll never stop to think that you're David Stevenson of Holroyd,' I says, 'but she'll just hand you over to the constable at once, and I don't think, my young gentleman,' I adds, 'that Tom Merriman having got the sack to fill your inside with ill-gotten goods 'll help you with the Bench in the very least.'"

"Well, so I suppose he gave in," said Dorothy, who was deeply interested.

"Well, of course, he had to," returned Barbara,

with practical plainness, "but all the same, he never forgave me for having been the one to get the better of him, and never forgot it, not to the very last day we were at the Hall. Ah! Miss Dorothy, darling, if you had thought proper to marry David Stevenson, you would have had to do without me. He never would have had me about him, and I wouldn't have taken service under his roof—no, not to save myself from ending my days in the workhouse."

"Barbara, Barbara," cried Dorothy chidingly, "not for me?"

"Well, if you had put it in that way, Miss Dorothy, you might have got over me," the old woman answered.

But stay! I think I ought to say here that although I have called her old in many parts of this story, Barbara was not, and could not reasonably be called an old woman in the common acceptation of the word. She was a year or so over fifty, and a very strong, hale woman at that, and at this time to Dorothy she was as a very rock and tower of strength.

Well, by virtue of the letter from Esther Brand and in the joy of expectation at her coming, Dorothy passed that day with quite a light heart, and even sat down to the little piano and sang one or two of the songs that Dick liked best. And then she went to bed and slept, leaving the door open between her room and Barbara's for company, and she dreamed, as she always did, about Dick.

Nor was it a pleasant dream. She saw Dick on board of a large steamer, wearing white clothes and a sailor hat, looking very bronzed and happy. He

was leaning over the side of the ship, with a cigarette in his mouth, just as she had seen him many a time, and by his side there stood a beautiful lady—not a girl like Dorothy herself, but a beautiful woman of about thirty years old, such a woman as Dorothy fancied her old friend at home, Lady Jane Sturt, might have been at that age. They seemed to be talking earnestly together, and after a time—such a long time it seemed in her dream—Dick took one of the lady's hands and raised it to his lips; then she laughed and said something, and Dick caught her to him and kissed her on the lips. Immediately afterwards, while Dorothy with frozen lips was gazing at them, Dick turned his head and looked her full in the eyes with the glance of an utter stranger.

With a shriek, Dorothy awoke—the sun was streaming in at the sides of the window-blinds, and Barbara was just coming through the doorway with a little tray bearing Dorothy's early cup of tea.

"Did I scream, Barbara?" Dorothy gasped.

"A bit of a cry. What ailed you, Ma'am?" Barbara asked.

"Oh! I was so frightened—I had such a horrid dream about the master. I thought——"

But Dorothy did not complete the sentence, for Barbara put out her hand with a horrified look. "Nay, now, Miss Dorothy, don't tell it. Whatever you do, don't tell me."

"But why?" cried Dorothy, open-eyed.

"You should never tell a dream before noon, Miss Dorothy," returned Barbara portentously.

"Oh!" exclaimed Dorothy, "isn't it lucky?" She

knew that Barbara was a great believer in luck, and signs and omens.

"It's fatal," answered Barbara solemnly, whereat Dorothy burst out laughing and the worst feelings of dread with which she had awakened passed away.

"I think," she said after breakfast, when Barbara was clearing the table—"that I shall put on my hat and go up to the High Street—I cannot finish this till I get some more lace;" then she held it up and showed it off to Barbara. "Isn't it sweet?" she exclaimed with intense satisfaction.

"It's lovely," returned Barbara, who was overjoyed at the prospect of a baby. "Then do you wish me to go with you, Ma'am, or will you go alone?"

"Do you want to go?" Dorothy asked.

"Well, Ma'am, to be honest, I don't. I want to turn out the room for Miss Esther. You see, she may come nearly as fast as her letter, and I shouldn't like to put her into a dirty room."

"It can't be dirty, Barbara," cried Dorothy, laughing, "because nobody has ever slept in it."

"Well, Ma'am," Barbara retorted, "I can't say that I know a dirtier person than Mr. Nobody—on the whole."

Dorothy laughed. "Well, then you evidently have a lot to do and I would just as soon go alone. So I will go soon, before I get tired or the day gets hot;" for although September was half over, the weather just then was most sultry and trying to those not in the best of health.

She was soon ready, and went into the cosy little kitchen to ask Barbara if there was anything that

she wanted, but she did not happen to want anything at all.

"Do I look all right?" Dorothy asked, turning herself about.

"Yes, you look very sweet this morning, Miss Dorothy," said Barbara. "I wish the master could see you this minute."

"So do I," echoed Dorothy promptly. "Well, he will see me soon enough, soon enough. Good-bye, Barbara."

Barbara followed her to the door and watched her out into the street, and truly, as she had said, her young mistress was looking very bonny that day. On her fair hair, loosely arranged yet not untidy-looking she had a small straw bonnet trimmed with ribbon and a cluster of gloire de Dijon roses. Over her pretty blue cotton gown she wore a long dust-cloak of some thin and light-toned material. She also wore tan-coloured shoes and *Suède* gloves of about the same tone, and she carried a large white cotton parasol to shield her from the sun.

It was a very simple and cheap toilette, but it was fresh and dainty-looking, and Dorothy looked bright and lovable and a little lady from the crown of her bonnet to the tips of her shoes; indeed, more than one person thought so as she passed up the street; and the old General, who was out for his usual morning trot, stopped in his walk, and wheeling round stood to look after her till she had turned the corner and was out of sight, when he went on with his self-imposed sentry-go, wishing with all his heart he was forty years younger.

Meantime Dorothy went serenely on her way,

reached the shop for which she was bound, and there made her purchases, all small enough for her to bring them away in a neat little parcel in her unoccupied hand. And then, just as she stepped off the door-step of the shop on to the pavement, she suddenly found herself face to face with David Stevenson.

If it had been possible, she would have retreated back into the shop; but it was too late for that. David Stevenson had already uttered an exclamation of surprise, and was standing close in front of her, holding out both his hands to her.

Now, if there was one person in all the wide world whom Dorothy would rather not have seen just then, that person was David Stevenson. I think she looked all the dismay which she felt, and that she felt all and perhaps more than the dismay which she looked.

"Oh! is that you?" she gasped.

David let his hands, with their glad welcome, drop instantly.

"You're not very glad to see me, Dorothy," he said, in quiet but bitter reproach.

"I—that is, you startled me," she returned, in a wild endeavour to put off any questions he might think proper to ask of her.

"Evidently," he said dryly, "and you want to get rid of me, eh?"

"Oh, not at all," biting her lip and wishing that she could sink into the ground or dissolve into thin air, anywhere out of the way of his hard and steely-blue eyes, which seemed to look her through and through, and to know in a moment all the secrets of her life.

"No? Ah, that is better. Then, since you *don't* want to get rid of me all in a hurry, perhaps you will let me walk a little way with you. May I?"

"Oh yes, certainly," said Dorothy, giving herself up for lost at once.

"Do you live near here?" he asked, as she turned towards Palace Mansions.

At that moment there was a slight block on the pavement of the always busy street, and just as David spoke, Dorothy perceived that the sweet-faced lady who lived on the floor above her, was also blocked, and stood for a moment or so face to face with her. Undoubtedly she had heard David's question just as Dorothy had done, and undoubtedly Dorothy had never seen her eyes so cold or her lips so austerely shut before. In her distress and annoyance at being thus apparently caught, Dorothy blushed a vivid guilty crimson—a fact upon which the sweet-faced lady put the usual construction to which all highly moral persons seem to jump at once in a moment of doubt—that is, the very worst construction possible.

"Can you give me no news from home, then?" Dorothy asked, in a desperate voice raised far above her usual tones.

David looked down at her in surprise—an involuntary action which was not lost upon the lady who was still unable to pass on.

"News?" he repeated. "Why, of course I can. I have so much news to tell you that I hardly know where to begin. Let me see—Lady Jane is back, of course."

Dorothy turned her head in time to see that the

lady had passed on and was out of ear-shot before David had begun his news.

There, just like David's stupidity to be too late. Why, she wondered irritably, could he not have happened to say something which would have let that woman upstairs know that they had known each other all their lives? But no, David had always blundered whenever and wherever she was concerned, and she supposed that he always would. Her interest in the home news was gone, lost in the depths of her annoyance, but she listened patiently till he had exhausted that topic, till she had heard who was married and who was dead, of a fire in such a one's rick-yard, and of a barn belonging to another which had been struck by lightning.

Then he told her how he had improved the Hall—her perfect old home, which in her mind needed improvement of no kind—how he had put a smart capable gardener in to bring the place into real good condition——

"And old Isaac?" said Dorothy, fiercely.

"Oh, he is still about—I shouldn't turn any old servant of yours off, you know. There are plenty of odd jobs for him about the place."

"What sort of odd jobs?" demanded Dorothy.

"Oh, weeding and toddling about picking up stones and—and doing odd jobs generally," answered David, who was beginning to get rather uncomfortable under the fire in her truthful eyes and the terrible directness of her questions.

"In fact, you have made Isaac underling, labourer, slavey to your grand new gardener, is that it?" she cried.

"Oh, come now," he began, but Dorothy stood still in the road and confronted him angrily.

"Is it so or not?" she asked.

"Well, something like that," he admitted, unwillingly.

"Is it absolutely so or not?" Dorothy asked again.

"Well, I'm afraid it is," said David, with a great air of making a clean breast of the whole matter. "You see, Dorothy, the old fellow never was much of a hand at gardening——"

"He was good enough for us," sighed Dorothy, in heart-broken voice.

"Yes; but indeed he really was past his work, or a should never have thought of displacing him. And if it hadn't been for you—that he was a good many years your gardener——"

"Nearly forty years," put in Dorothy.

"Well, of course, if it hadn't been for that I should just have replaced him without troubling any further about him. As it was, I made a place for him, and I give him ten shillings a week for what I could get better done by a boy for six."

"And the cottage?" asked she.

"Oh, well, of course, the cottage goes with the situation," answered David, who was getting rather sulky.

There was a moment's silence; then Dorothy suddenly stopped and turned to face him. "David," she flashed out, "you may be a good farmer, but you are a hard man, a hard man. One of these days you'll come to be—but, there, what is the good of talking to you? If long and faithful service will not touch your heart, what else will?"

"There is one thing which will always have power to touch my heart," he said eagerly. "Shall I tell you what?"

"No," said Dorothy, wearily. "I probably should not believe you. If forty years would not do it, nothing else could."

As she spoke she turned down the street which led to Palace Mansions, for she saw that it was hopeless now to try to prevent his finding out where she lived; and, indeed, now that Dick was safely out of the country she did not think that it mattered much. David, for his part, took advantage of the quiet side street, and spoke out what was in his mind.

"Dorothy," he said, "come back to the Hall, and I will show you whether I am a hard man or not; only come back and let us forget the past, nobody need know anything. I will never remind you of it. Only come back, my dear, and everything shall be as you wish—as you direct. I'll send the new gardener to Holroyd, and Isaac shall be head-gardener at the Hall, with a couple of men under him to do the work. Does that sound like being hard, Dorothy?"

"Yes," said Dorothy, coldly—"hardest of all, because you would not hesitate to buy me, body and soul, through my compassion and pity for those poor unfortunate ones, who cannot help themselves, and cannot fight against the hard power which your money and your strength gives you."

"Oh! Dorothy, it is not so," he cried. "I only ask you to come back because I love you and I want you. The old place wants you, and I hunger for you. Besides, I cannot bear to see you as you look now—tired and worn, and ten years older than

when you turned your back on all your old friends for the sake of a fellow who has brought you to this."

"To *what?*" Dorothy cried, her eyes opening wide and her tones expressing such astonishment that David fairly quailed before her look.

"To a ghost of your old self," he answered curtly. But it was all of no use. Dorothy could be curt too, on occasions, and she was so then.

"It seems to me that you are making mistakes all round, David," she said coldly. "I am not very well, and the heat has tried me—but I am *not* what you take me for. I have been, thank God for it, a blessedly happy wife for many months. I will wish you good-morning, David."

She turned away without giving him time to say a word, and went as quickly as was possible towards her home, and went in without turning her head to see what had become of him. As for David Stevenson, he simply stood rooted to the spot where she had left him, until she disappeared from his sight; then he took a step or two as if to follow her, but changed his mind and retraced his steps, with a face like a thunder-cloud.

He was so occupied with his own thoughts and his own disappointment that he never noticed a smart victoria and pair which was drawn up just within the corner of the quiet street, but its occupant, an old white-haired gentleman, had noticed him, and took keen stock of him as he passed. David Stevenson would have been considerably surprised if he could have heard the order which the same old gentleman gave to his coachman just after he had

swung past. "Follow that gentleman closely. Don't lose sight of him."

"Yes, m' lord," said the servant, and hopped up into the box, giving the order to the coachman.

"All right," murmured that dignitary in reply; then added in a lower voice still, "What's the old codger up to now, I wonder?"

"Uncommon pretty girl," answered Charles, in an equally low tone. "We've been after her some time."

"Who is she?"

"Mrs. 'Arris. Lives in Palace Mansions," with a wink.

"H'm! I wishes her joy of 'im," said the coachman, screwing his face up into a thousand expressive wrinkles.

"Me too," said the footman, sniggering. "Hi, he's going into the Park;" whereat the coachman turned his horses in at Prince's Gate also, and they drove in abreast of David Stevenson, who was looking no more at peace with the world or with himself than he had been when he turned into the High Street, out of the quiet road in which Palace Mansions may be found.

"Still faithful to Master Dick, or else the newcomer not attractive enough," thought Lord Aylmer with a sneer, as he gave a sharp, keen look at the tall young man's lowering face.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOPE DEAD.

I THINK that David Stevenson had never been in such a towering rage in his life as when he turned in at the Park Gates and went swinging along in the direction of the Achilles. For during those few moments when he watched her after she left him and before she disappeared into Palace Mansions, he had realised that she had gone from him for ever. He realised that whether she was actually married or not, she was not for him, and he had suddenly become aware, almost without knowing why, that there was a cause for her altered looks, a cause which would be for ever a bar to the fond hopes which he had cherished during nearly all his life, certainly ever since Dorothy as a wee, toddling, soft-eyed child had come, fatherless and motherless, to be the light and life of the old Hall and the very joy of Miss Dimsdale's lonely hearth.

So that fellow had got round her, after all—his bitter thoughts ran, as he strode along—and all the worship and devotion of his life had been flung aside as nought for the sake of a specious tongue and a swaggering army sort of manner.

As a matter of fact, Dick had not the very smallest shade of a swagger about him, but David Stevenson was the kind of man who invariably judges every man

by a type, and to him an army man was a man who turned his toes out a good deal more than was necessary and said "haw" between every three words he spoke. That the man who had stolen Dorothy's love from him did neither of these things made no difference to David's conception of him. He had stolen Dorothy from him, and that was enough to make David endow him in his own mind with all the most hateful attributes of his detestable class.

Nor did he even stop to consider that he was distinctly unjust in crediting Harris with stealing Dorothy's love from him. For it is impossible to steal from any man what that man had never had to lose, and most emphatically he had *never* possessed even one little tiny corner of Dorothy Strode's heart; to be plain, Dorothy had always detested him.

For an hour or more David strode about the Park till the storm of fury which possessed him had somewhat calmed down, and always the smart victoria with its pair of high-stepping, fiery horses and its pair of wooden-faced, imperturbable servants in their white and crimson liveries dogged his steps and kept him fairly in sight; and at last David noticed them.

"Damn that supercilious old brute," he muttered, as they passed him for the twentieth time; then he stood at the railings a minute or so and thought how slow it was—wondered how men and women could bear to crawl up and down in line, fretting their fine horses into a fever and never getting beyond a foot's pace.

He turned away from the Row into a side path, but the next moment he saw that the smart victoria had turned into that road also.

"Confound him, he must be watching me," he thought irritably, "and yet what should he want to watch me for? Oh, hang it, I'll go home!"

Without a moment's hesitation, he turned his steps towards Apsley House and made his way out at the big gates, where he hailed a cab and gave the man the address of his hotel, and forgot about the white-haired old gentleman in the smart victoria.

But the victoria was there, nevertheless, following immediately behind the modest cab; and when David got out and went into the Grand Hotel, Lord Aylmer called to the footman—

"Charles, I want you to take a message. Barker, stop."

Barker pulled up the horses beside the broad pavement, and Charles got down to hear his lord's orders.

"Go into the Grand and find out that gentleman's name—don't mention mine."

"Yes, m' lord," said Charles.

Now, Charles happened to be an ingenious youth who was not troubled with any nice scruples about his honour, and believed that the easiest way was invariably the best way. He therefore, secure in the halo which his smart white and crimson livery was enough to cast around him, went into the hotel and addressed himself to the stately house-porter of the establishment.

"I say, porter," said he, "my master, the Dook of Middlesex, wawnts to know the name of a gentleman just come in—came in a 'ansom—tall, fairish chap, looks like a country gentleman."

"D'yer mean that one?" asked the house-porter,

taking Charles to a glass door leading to the reading-room and pointing out David.

"Yes, that's the one," Charles answered.

"Oh, yes; that's Mr. David Stevenson, of Holroyd," said the house-porter.

"And where's Holroyd?"

"A mile or two from Harwich," answered the other. "At least, I heard him say so last night. His post-town is Harwich."

"Ah! yes—thanks. The Dook fancied he knoo him, but *I* fancy he was mistook. Good day to you, porter."

"Good day to you, my fine cock-pheasant," returned the big house-porter, contemptuously; but Charles had already reached the door and was going back, serene in the power of his own impudence, to impart the information which he had gathered, to his master.

"The gentleman's name is Stevenson, my lord," he said. "Mr. David Stevenson, of Holroyd, Harwich."

"Ah, yes," and then the old savage pulled out his note-book and jotted the name down without comment. "How did you find out?"

"I said my master, the Dook of Middlesex, wished to know, as he fancied he knoo the gentleman," Charles answered promptly.

Lord Aylmer burst out laughing. "Ah! very clever—very clever. Home."

"Yes, m' lord," said Charles.

Lord Aylmer laughed more than once on the way home, he was so intensely amused at the inventive genius displayed by Charles, whom he had not

before credited with much sharpness of that kind. He was a man who never took the trouble to make subterfuges to his servants: if he wanted a bit of information, he simply told one of them to get it, without caring what means were taken or giving any reason for wanting it. For instance, he would never say, "Go and find out who that gentleman is," and add, as ninety-nine people out of a hundred would do, "I think I know him"—no, he never troubled to do that: it was simply after the manner of the Centurion, "Go and find out who that is."

But he was greatly tickled by Charles' remarks, and more than once on the way home repeated to himself with a chuckle, "Dook of Middlesex! I must encourage Charles a little. 'Pon my soul, uncommonly neat—Dook of Middlesex!"

Meantime I must confess that Dorothy had gone home in what Barbara was accustomed to call "a boiling passion." Barbara happened to be coming across the little hall when she let herself in at the front door. "Miss Dorothy—my dear, what is it?" the old servant cried, her heart jumping fairly into her mouth as a dreadful idea flashed into her mind that her young mistress's hour was come.

"Barbara," said Dorothy, in a voice shaking with passion, "I take back everything that I have ever said in defence of David Stevenson—every word."

"What! have you seen him?" cried Barbara.

"I used to feel," Dorothy went on, in the same trembling tones, and without taking the smallest notice of Barbara's question, "very sorry that I could never fall in with Auntie's wishes concerning him. And then after Auntie got so fond of my

Dick, I wasn't sorry on Auntie's account any longer, but I was sorry for David, because I thought circumstances had been a little hard for him, so I have stood up for him with all of you. But you were all right, and I take back now every word that ever I have said in his favour."

Barbara drew her into the pretty drawing-room. "Sit down, my dear young mistress," she said tenderly, "and tell me all about it."

So Dorothy sat down on the sofa and told Barbara everything about her meeting with David—what he had said and what she had said; what he had *looked* and what she had *felt;* how he had turned old Isaac out of his place and had put a grand new-fangled gardener to be Isaac's master at the Hall; and finally, how he had asked her to go back and the past would be forgotten, and he had insinuated—nay, had told her plainly—but no, Dorothy's composure did not hold out long enough for her to tell that part of her story, for when she reached that point she gave way and broke down into violent sobbing.

Barbara sat down beside her and took her into her arms, so that she might lay her head upon the old servant's ample breast and cry her heart-ache away.

"Miss Dorothy dear," she said presently, curiosity getting the best of her at last, "did David Stevenson dare to tell you that you wasn't married?"

"Not in so many words, Barbara," Dorothy answered, sitting up now and drying her flushed face, "but he asked me to go back and marry *him*," with unutterable contempt, "and he would show me what love meant—*he* that turned my old friend out

of his place directly Auntie died—and he said something about my turning my back on all my friends for the sake of a fellow who had brought me to this."

"David Stevenson all over," remarked Barbara, drily. "But, my dear young mistress, you didn't let him go away thinking what he had said was true?"

"I told him I had been married for months," Dorothy replied, "and then I just said 'Good morning' in a tone of ice, and I walked straight in without even looking at him again."

"And he saw you come in here?" Barbara cried.

"Yes," Dorothy answered. "How could I help it?"

"No, I suppose not; but, depend on it, he will go gabbling back to Graveleigh and set her ladyship and all the rest of them on to you."

"Never mind if he does," Dorothy cried.

"But you wanted to keep it dark, my dear," Barbara reminded her.

"Yes; but it doesn't matter so much now that Dick is gone," Dorothy replied. "And, anyway, Esther will be here, and Esther will be able to ward off everybody and keep them from asking me too closely about anything. I only hope that David Stevenson won't try to force his way in here before Esther comes."

"What would be the good?" Barbara asked. "You told him you were married."

"Yes, but he didn't look a bit as if he believed me," Dorothy returned.

"Then just let him come here and try it on," cried Barbara valiantly, and really as she stood there, a

stout and comfortable figure with her arms akimbo, she looked more than a match for any ordinary man, and nobody would have believed, except such as knew her well, how utterly her courage always deserted her at a critical moment. "Let him try it on, that's all. *I* can give him a bit of information he won't find very much to his liking—*I* can tell his high and mightiness that I see you married with my own eyes."

But David Stevenson stood in need of no such information: he had not believed that Dorothy was married—she was right enough there. Still, he had realised at last that she was not for him, and that afternoon, whilst he was idly turning over the papers in the reading-room of the hotel and wishing himself with all his heart down at Holroyd, it suddenly occurred to him that if Dorothy really was married, he would be able to get evidence of the fact by walking down the street and spending an hour and half-a-crown at Somerset House.

And there, sure enough, he found the record that was the death-blow of his last little feeble hope—the record of the marriage between Richard Harris, bachelor, and Dorothy Strode, spinster, bearing a date now a little more than nine months old.

"Barbara Potter, witness," read David to himself between his teeth, then clenched his hand hard as it rested upon his knee, so that the glove which covered it was burst in several places. "Damn that old woman! she must have a hand in it, of course."

Then he put the great book back upon the table,

and strode out along the empty echoing corridors and across the great gloomy quadrangle, into the busy street. After a moment's hesitation, caused by the noise and throng of the street, he made up his mind.

"Hang it all, what's the good of stopping here, eating my heart out? I'll go back home: I shan't feel it so badly there."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MISTRESS OF HOLROYD.

THREE days had gone and still Esther Brand had not arrived in London. Each day Dorothy got more and more impatient for her presence, because, although she had never once seen David Stevenson since that morning when she had almost walked into his arms in the Kensington High Street, she was so afraid that he might be lurking about the neighbourhood that she had never set foot outside her own door. If she had only known that he was safely down at Holroyd, dividing his life between riding hard from one point of the property to another, and sitting moodily staring into the empty fire-grate, his thoughts all busily occupied in cursing at fate! However, that phase of feeling did not last long with him; for one fine September morning he went over to the Hall and wandered round the quiet old garden—a good deal of its especial charm of quaint beauty "improved" away now—where she had spent her happy childhood.

"I'll have that bed done away with," he said to old Isaac, pointing out a small neat bed cut in the velvet turf, just in front of the dining-room window; "it spoils the look of the lawn; dig it up, and we'll have it turfed over."

Old Isaac looked at him hesitatingly—the old man

had felt bitterly his degradation from gardener to odd man, yet ten shillings a week is not to be sneezed at when its almost certain alternative is the workhouse. He hardly dared to say what was in his mind; still, the old feudal instinct, the habit of forty years, was strong in him, and he ventured a timid protest.

"That were Miss Dorothy's own bed, Sir," he began: "she dug in it her little self, and then she'd take a tarn round and have another spell o' digging after. And then, in the spring-time, when the wiolets came out, she was werry proud o' the fust bunch she took to the mistress."

"H'm," muttered David, and moved away.

"Took it better nor I thought he would," mused old Isaac, rather elated at his own boldness.

But Isaac had counted his chickens too early, for later in the day the head-gardener came round to him. "By-the-bye, Isaac," he said, after mentioning one or two little matters, "the gov'nor wants that little bed under the dining-room window levelling and turfing over—wants it done at once."

"I hear," said Isaac.

The old man was trembling as he turned away, and when the other was gone, he stood by the little flower-bed as if it were a grave, looking down upon it with tear-filled eyes. "Brute!" he ground out between his teeth, "brute!" "What be I to do wi' the wiolets, Bell?" he asked, the next time he came across his superior.

"Gov'nor said you was to chuck 'em out on the rubbish heap," Bell answered.

"Nay, I'll take 'em down to mine," said Isaac in a quavering voice.

"As you like about that," said Bell, all unknowing of the tumult in the old man's breast.

And the day following that, David Stevenson ordered his horse and rode away from Holroyd, through Graveleigh and past the old Hall to a large and prosperous-looking farm, about a mile beyond the house where Dorothy's old friend, Lady Jane Sturt, lived. He turned in at the gates, and gave his horse into the care of a man who came running out. "Is Miss Elsie at home?" he asked.

"I believe she is, Sir," the man replied; "but if you'll knock at the door, they'll tell you for certain."

A nice-looking country girl in a neat apron and cap came to the door.

Yes, Miss Elsie was at home, the mistress had gone into Dovercourt. Would Mr. Stevenson come this way?

He followed her into a pretty enough sitting-room, though it had but few of the little touches which had made Miss Dimsdale's drawing-room so pretty and so restful. There were shades over wax flowers and a plaster of Paris vase containing some artificial orange-blossoms which had once adorned the wedding cake of the married daughter of the house, and there were white crochet-work rags over some of the chairs, and others with fearful and wonderful designs in crewels tied up with bits of gay-coloured ribbons. Yes, it was pretty enough, but not bearable to him after the quaint and dignified air which had pervaded everything at the Hall where *she* had lived.

In two minutes Elsie Carrington came in, a tall, wholesome-looking girl, with fair hair that was too

yellow and cheeks that were too red, and as David's eyes fell upon her I am bound to say that his very soul seemed to turn sick within him. Not that he flinched, oh no, David Stevenson was not of the kind that flinches.

"I've come on a queer enough errand, Elsie," he began.

"Yes?" she said in a questioning tone.

"Yes! But it's no use beating about the bush, it's best to be honest and true, isn't it?"

"Of course it is." She was very much flushed and puzzled too, but as yet she had no idea of his meaning.

"You must know as well as I do," he went on, not attempting to go a step nearer to her or even to take her hand, "that I've cared for Dorothy Strode all my life."

"Yes," said the girl faintly.

"Well," standing up very straight and stiff, and with a face like marble, "that's all over now, and I want to get my life settled into shape. Holroyd wants a mistress, and I've kept the place open so long," with a piteous attempt at making fun, "that I hardly like to offer it to any one else. Well," finding she did not speak, "what do you say, Elsie?"

She was staring at him in utter consternation, her light-blue eyes filled with wonder, her white brow wrinkled, some of the colour blanched from her cheeks, and her lips parted. "I don't quite understand, David," she said at last.

He drew a long breath of impatience. "Look here, Elsie," he said, "I am young, rich, decent-

looking, and not a bad sort as fellows go. But it's no use my coming and offering you the devotion of a lifetime; you wouldn't believe me if I did—you'd know it was a lie, and I don't want to begin by lying to you. But I can offer you all the rest of my life, and I swear I'll do my level best to be a good husband to you—I swear that."

Elsie fairly gasped. "You are asking me to marry you, David?" she cried.

"Of course I am," he answered.

There was dead silence for a few moments. David, sore and hurt, desperately anxious to get his future settled so that looking back would be a folly and repining nothing short of a sin, stood waiting for her decision, while Elsie turned away to the window and looked out over the fields, a thousand bitter thoughts chasing each other through her brain. It was all over with Dorothy, and Dorothy had evidently chosen another, Elsie was sure of that, though David had not said so. And David had turned to her in his trouble—there was comfort in that. But Dorothy had his love still, she was certain of that. You could see it in his haggard face, his nervous manner; hear it in his defiant voice. Many and many a time she had pictured him coming wooing to her. She had let her hands fall idle in her lap, and her sewing lie neglected, while in fancy she had seen him turning in at the gate or coming in at the door, his mouth half smiling (as she had seen it for Dorothy's sake), his cold eyes lighted up with a tenderness as dear as it was rare; but in all her dreams Elsie had never pictured him coming like this, haggard and drawn for the loss of Dorothy, nervous, brusque.

impatient, brutally truthful and just, to ask her to make a bargain, in which love should be left out of the reckoning! To offer her his body, while she knew his heart was all Dorothy's! Oh! it was a dreary wooing, a hard, hard bargain for her to make or mar.

"Well," said he, after a minute or two, "what do you say?"

"Is Dorothy going to be married?" she asked suddenly.

He winced at the question, but he answered it readily enough. "Dorothy is married," he said steadily.

"Oh!" and then she gave a great sigh and looked at him with piteous, yearning eyes.

"Well?" he said, "I am waiting."

"I don't know what to say," she burst out.

"No! And yet I fancied you liked me better than the other fellows round about."

His tone was half-bitter, half-reproachful, as if his last hope was leaving him. The girl was touched by it instantly, and turned quickly to him with both her hands outstretched. "Oh! David," she cried, in a voice of pain, "you know that I have always—always—liked you—but—but——"

"But what?" he asked coldly and without taking the outstretched hands.

Elsie let them fall to her side again.

"You have not said one word about caring for me," she said in a trembling, timid voice.

David began to feel that this wooing, which he had fancied would be so easy, was going to prove more difficult than he had had any idea of. He had believed

always that he had only to hold up the prospect of being mistress of Holroyd for Elsie to simply jump at the chance, and here, to his intense surprise, was Elsie demurring to take him because he had said nothing of love.

"If I were a liar," he said roughly, "I should have come and made love to you. I should have pretended that I had been mistaken in thinking I had cared for Dorothy, I should have sworn I had never loved any one but you. And by-and-bye you would have found me out, and then we should both be wretched. As it is, I came and told you honestly all that was in my heart, I—I—asked you to help me over this bad time, because I thought you loved me and would bear with me because of your love. As it is, never mind, there are plenty of women who will marry me willingly enough, to be the mistress of Holroyd."

"David!" she cried, as he turned towards the door.

He looked back—his hand still upon the handle. "Well?" he asked. "Is it not so?"

In that one moment a dozen thoughts seemed to go crowding through the girl's distracted brain—a vision of Holroyd, with its rich red gables, its stately avenue of horse-chestnuts, its pretty lodge, its velvet lawns, and wide-sweeping view across the great sheet of water running up from the sea, then a vision of Holroyd with a strange woman as mistress, a vision of that strange woman's children breaking the serene stillness of the place—ah! no, she could not lose him for the sake of the one thing wanting which would make her cup of happiness full—in time that might come—and even if it did not, she would at least be spared the agony of seeing another woman

reigning at Holroyd. No, whatever happened in the future, whatever might come to pass, she could not, would not, dared not run the risk of losing the man she loved. In that brief space of time, the true instinct of feminine dignity which always lives in a woman's heart, called for notice, but in vain—it was stifled in the pangs of love which consumed her. "David, don't go," she cried, in an appealing voice, as he turned the handle of the door. "I only hesitated because—because I have always loved you so, and—and I thought that I should break my heart——" She stopped short there, ashamed to end her sentence.

David Stevenson shut the door and came across the room to her side. "You thought what would break your heart?" he asked.

But Elsie shook her head. "Never mind," she said bravely. "We won't talk about that. I will come to Holroyd, and—and help you to forget the past if I can."

"Then that's a bargain," said he, drawing a long breath.

He did not say a word beside, did not attempt to touch her, to kiss her, or act in any way different to his usual manner to her, excepting, perhaps, that he was less polite than ordinary custom considers necessary between persons who are not bound together by ties of blood.

"By-the-bye," he said suddenly, "I have bought something to seal our contract. No, you need not look like that. I only bought it yesterday. I went over to Ipswich on purpose."

He had taken a little case out of his pocket, and

now held his hand out to her with a ring lying upon the palm. It was a beautiful ring—diamond and sapphires—a ring fit for a princess.

"Won't you have it?" he asked in surprise, as she made no effort to take it.

"Yes, if you will give it to me," she answered.

He took the ring in his other hand and held it towards her. Elsie took it with an inward groan, a wild cry rising up in her heart. "Oh! my God, will it be like this for always?" and then she put it on her left hand, whence it seemed to strike cold to her very heart.

"I must go now," David said, after looking at her hand for a moment. "I'll come back this evening. I must go now. Will you tell your people, and then I'll speak to your father when I come? And I shall ask for an early wedding, Elsie; the sooner it is over and we get settled down the better."

"Yes," she said faintly.

There was none too much colour in her cheeks now, poor child, and her blue eyes were dark with pain.

David looked at her uneasily. "I must get away for an hour or two and think it all over," he said half nervously. "I must have a clear story ready for your father."

"Yes."

"Then—good-bye."

"David," she said in an almost inaudible voice, "you have not told me that you are glad or anything. Have you not *one* kind word for me? Has Dorothy got everything still?"

He started as if he had been shot, but he turned

back at once and took her in his arms and kissed her passionately half a dozen times. "Oh! my poor girl, it is rough on you," he said regretfully. "I'm a brute to let you do it."

"No, no," cried she, winding her arms about his neck; "no, no. I would rather be your slave than any other man's queen. Kiss me again, David."

And David shuddered. Why? With the perversity of love! The heart that beat against him was beating for him alone. The blue eyes looking so yearningly into his were pretty and true. The clinging arms were fond and loving, but they were not Dorothy's arms; they were not Dorothy's eyes; it was not Dorothy's heart; and he shuddered. And the next moment he was on his horse again and tearing homewards, while Elsie lay in a frenzy of grief on the floor, just where he had left her standing looking mournfully after him.

Poor child! poor child! dimly and vaguely she realised what she had done. She realised that if she had held out firmly against him and had said, "I have loved you all my life, and as soon as you will come and tell me you really want me for myself I will gladly come to Holroyd; but I will not marry any man whose heart is filled full of another woman—I would rather live and die alone than that"—that then she would have had a fair chance of winning his heart as entirely as even she could wish. She realised this without actually putting her thoughts into language, and she dimly grasped, too, that by fearing to let him go she had made herself David Stevenson's slave for ever.

CHAPTER XV.

THE THIN END OF THE WEDGE.

WELL, it happened the very day after this, that Lord Aylmer made up his mind that he would wait no longer in effecting an entrance into the little flat in Palace Mansions.

To do him justice, he never for one moment suspected that his nephew and Mrs. Harris were married. He imagined that the little establishment was kept up in a way which is not an uncommon one in London, and that now Dick was safely packed off to India, he could go and make friends with the loveliest girl he had seen for many a day, without any more difficulty than that of starting an acquaintance.

To tell the truth plainly, Lord Aylmer had seen Dorothy with Dick several months before he carried out the plan which had got his nephew safely out of the road, and had left him, as he believed, poor conceited, deluded old man, a fair field; and to tell the truth further and more plainly still, Lord Aylmer had fallen desperately in love with her! So desperately that he had put himself under great obligations to his old friend Barry Boynton, had set my lady's suspicions working, and had made Dick detest him more than ever, in order that he might possibly be able by hook or by crook to find favour in Dorothy's eyes.

Poor deluded old man, if he had only known all! If he could only have listened to the young husband and wife discussing "the old savage," and have known all that had its home in Dorothy's faithful and tender heart!

But then, you see, he did not, and so I have a longer story to tell you than I should have had if all had gone smoothly and well with our young couple, and they had started their married life at the tail of a marching regiment, on an increased allowance kindly given them by a liberal and indulgent uncle.

The old lord had not found it an easy matter to effect an acquaintance with the young lady in Palace Mansions; and really, when you think of it, it is not always an easy thing to accomplish, especially when there is no help on the other side! However, this morning, after having spent many hours reconnoitering the block of buildings called Palace Mansions, after having driven slowly up and down the High Street, after making many more or less useless purchases in the High Street shops, and after fretting his impatient old soul into a fever, he made up his mind that he would go boldly to the house, ask for "Mrs. Harris," claim a friendship with the departed Dick, and gradually work into a position of friendliness with the object of his present admiration.

This admirable plan was, however, destined never to be carried out—not because Lord Aylmer changed his mnid, not a bit of it! He carried out his part of it so far as to order his carriage for a certain hour, and when that hour came to get into it and to give an order to Charles.

"Where to, m' lord?"

"Palace Mansions."

"Yes, m' lord."

"An' I believe," murmured Charles to Barker, as they drove off, "that the old codger's done it at last. Palace Mansions is the order—that's where Mrs. 'Arris lives, you know."

"Ay," muttered the coachman, in reply. "And Mrs. 'Arris 'll catch a Tartar in 'im, no mistake about that."

"They generally takes care of themselves," said Charles, with a cynicism worthy of his estimable master.

Coming events, they say, cast their shadows before, and Barker, who had been giving a small share of attention to Charles and gossip, suddenly pulled in his horses with a jerk. "'Osses is inclined to be playful to-day," he remarked.

"I dessay they know it is the wrong time of year to be in town," returned Charles, superciliously.

"Likely enough. 'Osses is as sensible as Christians, and sensibler than some," Barker rejoined.

As they got over the ground the "playfulness" of the horses did not subside; indeed, on the contrary, it increased, and to such an extent that by the time they turned into the Kensington High Street they were racing along at express speed, with the evident intention of bolting as soon as they had a chance.

Barker, however, knew his work and did not give give them the chance at all, and by the time they reached the corner of the road for which they were bound, they were going steadily again. Unfortunately at that point, however, that terrible maker of mischief, the unforeseen, happened—a little child with

a balloon as large as a man's head suddenly let go the string with which she had held it captive; the balloon soared away and dashed into the near horse's face; the child screamed at the loss of her toy; the horse reared and plunged. Barker administered a cut of his whip, and the next moment they were dashing down the road, and an elderly woman was lying helplessly in a dead faint just where the carriage had passed.

"My God! we are over some one," shouted Lord Aylmer. He was the kind of man who, on emergency, always appeals to the Deity, whom in all his ways of life he utterly and systematically ignores. "Let me get out," he cried.

Barker, who was pulling in the horses with might and main, had already checked their mad speed, and a moment or so later turned the horses, with a face like chalk and a dreadful fear knocking at his heart that the motionless figure lying in the road would never move again. He pulled up just where the crowd was gathering, and Lord Aylmer was out of the carriage before Charles could collect his scattered senses sufficiently to get off the box.

The crowd was gathering in numbers every moment, and was not only dense and strong, but curious. Lord Aylmer, however, without standing on ceremony, vigorously elbowed his way to the inner circle.

"Let me pass; stand aside. Policeman, I am Lord Aylmer—my horses were frightened by an infernal balloon that a child was carrying. Is she much worse?"

"Dead faint at present, my lord," replied the

policeman, who had the woman's head up on his knees. "I wish we could get some brandy and some water."

Lord Aylmer looked round for Charles. "Charles, get some brandy and some water from somewhere or other. Be quick."

Just then a well-dressed young woman pushed her way through the crowd. "Let me pass," she urged. "Can't you see I've brought brandy? Stand back, you men. Have you never seen an accident before? Do you want to kill her? Stand back!"

She was a handsome woman, scarcely more than a girl; her hands and face and speech betokened that she was gently born; her fearless words, putting into words what was in her mind, had the effect of causing the crowd to shrink back a little. "Is she much hurt, poor thing?" she asked.

"Pretty bad case, miss," answered the policeman, who was trying to get a little brandy down the unconscious woman's throat.

"Hadn't you better get her into my house? She can't lie here," she went on. "Has any one gone for a doctor?"

"I should get her orf to the 'orspital at once, miss," the policeman replied.

"Would you? Poor thing! I was standing at my window and saw it all. You oughtn't to let your coachman drive like that," she added severely to Lord Aylmer.

"I don't; but my horses were frightened by a child's balloon," he explained.

"You oughtn't to have horses that are frightened at trifles," she responded illogically.

"I think we'd better get her orf at once," said the policeman, "she gives no signs of coming round."

"How can we take her? Shall I? I have the carriage here ready, and the horses are sober enough now."

"Yes, my lord, I really think that's the best thing we can do," the other answered. "If your man 'll give me a hand we'll lift her in, in a minute."

Eventually the woman was lifted into the victoria, and the energetic young woman having rushed back to her house for her hat, got in also, and supported her in as comfortable a position as was compatible with her insensible condition. Just as they were starting, a doctor arrived on the scene, took a hasty glance at the victim of the accident, and quietly got in, taking possession of the little back seat. "I'd better go—it's a bad business," he said to Lord Aylmer, realising that he was owner of the carriage.

"Ye—yes—we had better follow in a cab," Lord Aylmer said, turning to the policeman. "I suppose you'll see this through."

"Oh, yes, my lord; I'm bound to do that," he answered.

Lord Aylmer was getting more and more nervous: he got into the cab looking white and scared, with his sinful old heart thumping against his ribs in a way that was very unusual with him. Not because his carriage had run over an elderly woman and it was likely to prove a fatal accident, not for that reason at all, but wholly and solely because, when Charles and the policeman had lifted the unconscious woman into the carriage, Lord Aylmer had picked

up a letter which was lying face upwards in the roadway just where she had laid. Short-sightedness was not one of Lord Aylmer's signs of approaching years, and in an instant he had grasped that the letter was addressed to his nephew Dick, and before Charles and the policeman had got their burden safely into the victoria, he had thrust the letter into his pocket, with a sort of impious thanksgiving to Heaven that at last the girl he had been hunting down for many weeks was delivered into his hand.

For evidently this respectable elderly woman, dressed in decent black, was Mrs. Harris's servant; and if it happened that she did not keep more than one—why, this accident would put her altogether at his mercy.

He was positively trembling when they reached the St. George's Hospital, and Barbara was carried in, not unconscious now, for the slight jolting of the carriage had brought her to again. Then there was a short time of impatient waiting before the doctor came to them—that is, Lord Aylmer and the young lady who had come with the patient.

"Broken leg," he said—"a bad thing at her time of day. And she is worrying about her mistress—wants to send and break it gently—isn't in good health just now. Will you go?" turning to the young lady.

"I? Oh, I'm very sorry, but I'm due at rehearsal now—I must go off at once. Couldn't you go?" she asked, turning to Lord Aylmer.

"Certainly—with pleasure. Shall I bring her back to see the old lady?" Lord Aylmer inquired, in a tone which was a delightful mixture of gallantry

and fatherliness—a tone which had, by-the-bye, stood him in good stead many a time and oft.

"Yes, it would quiet her down a little, I dare say," the house-surgeon answered.

"Very well. Make me liable for any expenses, you know," Lord Aylmer said, as he moved towards the door. "Can I see you into a cab, my dear lady?" he added to the actress.

"Thanks," she answered.

"And may I have the honour of settling with the cabman?"

"Oh, no—very kind of you, but I always pay for myself. The Cornhill—good-bye."

The cab rolled off, Lord Aylmer uncovered his handsome old head, smiled his most fascinating smile, and bowed with a profound air of respect, which was quite lost on the back of the retreating cab and its occupant. Then he got into his victoria and said, "Palace Mansions."

"Yes, m' lord," answered Charles woodenly; then remarked to Barker, as soon as he hopped up on to the box—"Palace Mansions; even broken legs don't put 'im orf."

"Seems so," said Barker. Barker's nerves were all shaken with the accident, and he would have given anything he possessed for a nip of brandy; he was not, therefore very much inclined for conversation.

Meantime, as soon as they had reached Albert Gate, Lord Aylmer drew out the letter and looked at it with a grin of satisfaction on his wicked old face. "H'm. Richard Harris, Esq., c/o Messrs. Brewster & Co., 10, Grove Street, Madras, India," he muttered. "Oh, so you have not cut the chains, Master Dick, you've

not burnt your boats behind you. What a fool you are, to be sure!"

He opened the letter without the smallest scruple, tore the envelope into a thousand fragments and scattered them to the winds, then settled down to enjoy the tender words beginning—"My own dear Dick," and ending, "Your loving and faithful little wife, Dorothy."

"So her name is Dorothy," he mused. "Strange that they should always lay such stress on their love and their faithfulness! They're all alike. I wonder who the Esther is that she talks about. Barbara is evidently the old girl who came to grief just now. Well, Barbara is safely laid by the leg for the next few weeks. Really, it could not have fallen out better if one had planned it all. But I wonder who Esther is. 'Esther hasn't come yet,' she says, 'but may come at any moment.' I must find out about Esther."

When they got to Palace Mansions, he saw Dorothy looking anxiously out of the wirdow.

"On the watch," he said to himself, "and pretty uneasy too."

The lovely face disappeared when the carriage drew up at the door, and the smart footman, in his glory of crimson and white, jumped down and opened the door for the handsome old gentleman, who got out and went into the building. He knocked at the door of No. 3, and Dorothy, being perfectly alone, had no choice but to go and open it.

"Am I speaking to Mrs. Harris?" said the suave, wicked old voice.

"Yes," answered Dorothy, wondering what he could possibly want with her.

"May I come in? I am Lord Aylmer. I have something to tell you. No, don't be alarmed; it is nothing very bad. Pray don't alarm yourself."

At the mention of his name—and as the policeman and the doctor, the young lady who had gone to Barbara's aid, and the people at St. George's knew all about him, it would, he knew, be useless to deceive Dorothy as to his identity, so he boldly gave his own name and trusted to the chance of her not knowing that he was anything to Dick—Dorothy started as if she had been shot, and at the hint of "something to tell," which instinct always tells us means bad news, she staggered back, and would probably have fallen if he had not caught her.

"I beg you will not frighten yourself like this," he cried. "Indeed, it is not so serious as that."

"It is——" Her lips could not utter Dick's name, her agony was so great; but her eyes spoke volumes in place of her tongue.

It never occurred to Lord Aylmer that she was thinking of Dick. He only thought how lovely she was in her distress, and wondered how he could best tell her the truth.

"The fact is," he said, blurting the truth out at last, "there has been an accident, and your old servant——"

"Barbara—is she hurt?" Dorothy cried in dismay.

"I am sorry to say that she is hurt. More sorry to be obliged to own that it was my carriage which did the mischief. But won't you let me come in and tell

you all about it? It is such a shame to keep you standing there."

"Oh, yes, of course. Forgive me, but I—that is, you have startled me, and I forgot that we were still here. Come in."

She turned and led the way to the little drawing-room, and as she pushed open the door, suddenly there flashed across her mind a remembrance of the fact that a large portrait of Dick was standing on a little table near the fireplace. Quick as thought she walked straight to the table and turned the portrait face downwards, carelessly throwing over it the pretty lace trifle which adorned the top of a little chair which stood close by.

She flattered herself that the old lord had not seen or at any rate noticed the action, and turned to him eager to hear what had happened to Barbara.

"Tell me, is she much hurt?" she asked. "My poor old Barbara! How was it?"

He told her then exactly how the accident had happened, and how they had taken the old lady (as he called Barbara, with an air of being himself quite a boy) off to St. George's, she being insensible and not able to tell them where she lived.

"To St. George's! Is that a hospital?" Dorothy cried. "Oh, my poor Barbara! She will think that the end of the world has come."

"Oh, no. She is much better off than she would be in any private house," said Lord Aylmer, soothingly. "But I am most grieved and sorry to tell you that her leg is broken, and she is naturally very anxious that you should hear of her, and, if possible, that she should see you."

"Oh, I'll go. I'll go at once," Dorothy cried. "Would you be kind enough to get me a cab? I won't lose another minute. Oh, my poor, dear old Barbara!"

"May I drive you there? I have my carriage at the door," he asked.

In an uncontrollable burst of gratitude Dorothy put out her two little trembling hands and took his. "Oh, Lord Aylmer," she cried, "how good you are! I won't keep you waiting a minute. I will be ready before you know that I have gone."

She ran out of the room and came back with her bonnet on and a dust-cloak over her smart tea-gown, but not before Lord Aylmer had quietly gone to the table and looked at the portrait which she had so adroitly hidden. Yes, as he had suspected from her movements, it was a portrait of Master Dick! He put it down again and walked to the window, where he stood looking at his handsome carriage, with its satin-coated horses and the two tall servants in their resplendent liveries. Lord Aylmer wondered how long the fascinations of a photograph would hold out against the fascinations of such a turn-out as that. And Dorothy, all the time, was thinking how lucky it was that it was Lord Aylmer who had picked up Barbara, and how, now that she had got touch with him, she would be able to work things into a straight and comfortable state and send for her darling home again, instead of going out to India to join him.

"I haven't been long, have I?" she said, as she came in.

"Very quick indeed," he answered approvingly, and added to himself, "'Pon my word, but Master

Dick has very fair taste—knows the right sort when he sees it."

"I will put my gloves on as we go; do not let us lose any time," she said, going towards the door.

He handed her into the carriage with an air of deference he might have shewn to a princess, then he got in himself and sat beside her.

"Back to St. George's Hospital," he said to Charles.

"Yes, m' lord," said Charles.

And, as ill-luck would have it, at that very instant the lady with the serene eyes who lived on the floor above Dorothy's flat, came down the street in time to see them come out and the old gentleman hand her into the carriage—nay, in time also to hear Charles's reply of "Yes, m' lord."

As if by instinct, the two women looked at one another—there was no expression in the serene face of the lady who was on foot, nothing noticeable about her excepting a cold severity in her eyes; it was but the glance of a moment, yet Dorothy, who guessed what was in the mind of the other, grew scarlet from chin to brow, and turned her head away that Lord Aylmer might not see that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Will you be able to get on without your old servant?" Lord Aylmer asked, as they drove along.

"I must, for the present," answered Dorothy.

"But I meant—have you—that is——"

"You meant have I another servant?" she finished. "No, I have not. I must see about some one to take her place for the time. I wonder where I shall go to look for one?"

"You don't know this part of London well, then?" he asked.

"I don't know London well at all," Dorothy answered, "for I lived in the country all my life until I was—married."

There was a scarcely noticeable hesitation before she uttered the word married, and Lord Aylmer interpreted it in his own way.

"If you could trust me to find out about it, I think I know just the very person," he said. "My valet's wife she is—an excellent cook and a very clever, capable servant in every way."

"But would she come?"

"I think so."

"But to a little flat like mine, with nobody to do anything but herself. I am afraid she is a person accustomed to a very large establishment——"

"I think that will be all right, I will make it worth her while to come. No, don't look so, my dear Mrs. Harris; it will only be just and right that I should pay for your temporary domestic—it must be a frightful inconvenience, and of course it was my fault. If I hadn't been there, the old lady wouldn't have come to grief."

"You are *too* good," murmured Dorothy, gratefully.

She could not help wondering, as they drove along through the mellow autumn air, how it was that Dick had so mistaken his uncle. It seemed to her that he was all that was charming and considerate—the sort of old gentleman who does not seem old, although his hair is white and he must have lived enough years for the world to call old. It was

evident to her sweet and simple soul that Dick had never really got at his uncle's inmost nature—which was true, and all the better for Dick that he hadn't. He could not, she argued, be such a savage as Dick had always made out, for why should he take so much trouble for an insignificant stranger like herself, or for an old woman like Barbara, even if his carriage did happen to have knocked her down and broken her leg? That had nothing, or next to nothing, to do with it—oh, it was plain to her that Dick had never managed his uncle properly, and very likely Lady Aylmer had never managed him properly either.

So by the time they had reached the hospital, Dorothy had thought herself into quite a blissful frame of mind. She had built up a wonderful castle in the air, when Lord Aylmer should express a wish, "Oh, my dear, I do wish that you were my daughter!" when she would throw off her disguise and say, "I am the next thing to your daughter." "How?" "Why, I'm Dick's wife."

She was so engrossed in her dream that she did not notice that they had reached their destination, until a smooth voice at her elbow said, "Now, dear lady."

Somehow the tone jarred on her dream, but her eyes were still radiant as she turned them towards him. "I did not notice where we were," she said in a voice still tinged with the brightness of her dream.

"Happy thoughts," said he, as he helped her to the ground.

"Very happy ones," she answered, smiling.

They did not permit her to stay very long. Barbara was lying still, very faint and weak from the shock of the accident and the pain of her leg. She was worrying and anxious about her young mistress, and Dorothy hastened to re-assure her.

"Dear Barbara," she said, "don't worry the least little bit about me, not a little bit. I shall be just as well looked after as if you were there. Lord Aylmer is going to send at once to his valet's wife, a very respectable, middle-aged woman, very clever and a good cook. And Miss Esther may be here any day now, you know; so that I shall get on beautifully. All you have to do, dear old Barbara, is to possess your soul in patience and get well as quickly as ever you can."

"I can't think what the master will say," fretted Barbara.

"The master! Why, he will be as sorry as if *I* had broken my leg, or very nearly," Dorothy cried. "Now, dear, here is the nurse looking at me with a threatening eye. I must go. Good-bye, my dearest old Barbara, and don't worry, because I shall have my new help in to-night."

She stayed to ask a few questions of the nurse, chiefly about what things Barbara would need, then they drove quietly back to Kensington.

For a little way Dorothy was silent. "Poor old Barbara!" she burst out at length. "I don't believe she was ever ill in all her life before; at least, I never knew her to be ill, never."

"And you have known her long?"

"Ever since I could remember anything," Dorothy replied.

Lord Aylmer assumed an expression of surprise, mingled with assent—he had a wonderful variety of facial impersonations, he could even assume goodness on occasion. "Comfort that old lady is safe in St. George's," he said to himself, as he watched Dorothy's lovely mobile face.

She turned again to him. "How soon do you think the woman you spoke of will be able to come?" she asked.

"To-night, I hope," he replied. "Any way, I will go and see her and let you know."

"But what a trouble for you!"

"Not at all—a great pleasure, I can assure you," gallantly.

"How good you are!" she cried, for the twentieth time.

"It is very easy to be good, if I am good," he said, smiling; "but I am afraid you judge me too kindly altogether. Then I will drop you at your house and go and see this good woman at once, come back, and let you know the result."

"Yes, if you will," said Dorothy.

He helped her to alight and saw her safe in the house, then got into the carriage again. "To Grosmont Road," he said.

"Yes, m' lord," Charles replied.

"Where to now?" asked Barker, who was getting tired and generally desperate.

"Grosmont Road."

"Oh, my!" muttered Barker. "I wasn't surprised when broken legs didn't put 'im orf Mrs. 'Arris; but when Mrs. 'Arris don't put him orf Grosmont Road, it is a pretty go."

Meantime, Dorothy had gone in to the entrance hall of Palace Mansions, where the porter of the establishment met her. "A lady for you, Ma'am," he said. Then there was a pause, a rush, and a glad cry of "Oh, Esther! Esther!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DICK'S IMAGE.

IT would be impossible for me to tell you what a relief it was for Dorothy to find her cousin Esther awaiting her on her return home. She cried a little, of course, and then managed to tell her all about poor Barbara's accident.

"Just as well for you that I turned up when I did, my dear," said Esther, drily; "it might have been very awkward for you to be left alone long."

"Oh, but Lord Aylmer was so kind," Dorothy cried. "He not only took me to the hospital to see Barbara and brought me back again, but he has actually gone off now to see his valet's wife, who is the very person to stay with me till Barbara is able to come home again."

"Yes, that is really very good of him," Esther admitted. "But now, my poor little excited pale-face, I am going to make you a cup of tea. Show me the way."

So Dorothy took her into Barbara's neat little kitchen, and Miss Brand established her cousin in a chair, while she put the tea-things together and made all ready. Then she carried the tray into the drawing-room and made Dorothy sit in a big arm-chair while she waited upon her and gave her everything that she needed for her comfort.

"I suppose this Lord Aylmer is a smart man-about-town sort of person," she remarked presently, as she slowly stirred her own tea round and round.

"Oh, awfully old," answered Dorothy—"at least, he doesn't *seem* old, you know, but at the same time he *is* old. His hair is as white as snow, and he has a delicious old-fashioned, half-fatherly sort of manner. And so kind, so thoughtful."

"Ah, well, it is a very good thing. Really, the world isn't half so bad as it sometimes seems," Esther said dreamily. "Well," with a quick change of tone, "and this Dick of yours—he is perfection, of course?"

"Dear Dick," murmured Dorothy. "Yes, he *is* perfection. He did hate so to go and leave me, but he had to go—he had such a good appointment offered him, he did not dare refuse it. Still, he hated to go and leave me, just now especially. What he would say if he knew about Barbara, I can't think. I don't think I would tell him, would you?"

"Not till all is over," answered Esther. "It would only worry him for nothing. By-the-bye, what is he like?"

"Oh," and Dorothy looked round for her Dick's portrait. "Oh, here he is," holding it out to her cousin.

Esther Brand took it and looked at it attentively for a long time, sipped her tea, and looked again and yet again.

"Well," said Dorothy, impatiently.

"I like him," said Esther, "he looks good and true, and he is a handsome man too—a fine, honest-

looking, manly man. Yes, I like him—you're a lucky little girl, Dorothy."

"So *I* think," answered Dorothy proudly, "and Dick is just what he looks—honest as the day, and as good as gold."

Esther laughed. "Well, you are a lucky little woman to have won such a husband. *I* never met a man like that, or I should have been tempted to give up my liberty long ago. Do you know, dearie, I always had a horrible conviction that you would end by marrying David Stevenson, and I always did dislike David Stevenson with all my heart and soul."

"So did I," answered Dorothy promptly.

For a moment she was tempted to tell Esther all about her meeting with David, then a feeling that it would be scarcely fair to him held her back, and she kept her own counsel about that matter.

"Of course there is no knowing what I might or might not have done if dear Auntie had lived," she said, wishing to explain everything as far as possible and yet avoid saying much about David's feelings for her, "and if I had never seen Dick; but then, you see, I did meet Dick, and Dick liked me, and—and——"

"And David Stevenson went to the wall," Esther said, finishing the sentence for her, "and a very proper and suitable place for him too, my dear child," with a laugh.

Dorothy laughed too. "Ah! you are all very hard on poor David," she said softly.

So they sat talking over the old times and the new for more than an hour. Then Esther suddenly bethought her of dinner.

"Now, how shall we do about dinner? Hadn't we better wait a little and see if this woman comes, and then go into town and dine somewhere?" she said. "I can't offer to cook a dinner for you. If I did, it would probably kill you to eat it."

"Just as you like. Then, couldn't we call at St. George's and leave a note to tell Barbara you have come?" Dorothy asked. "It will be such a load off her mind."

"To be sure," Esther answered; and then they settled down to their chat again, and Esther heard a great deal more about Dick, and learned a great many of Dorothy's hopes and wishes about the baby that was to come before very long.

And presently there came some one to the door who rang gently and knocked softly.

"I will go; sit still," cried Esther.

She went to the door, where she found a handsome, neatly dressed woman of about forty years old. "Mrs. Harris?" she said inquiringly.

"No," said Esther; "I am not Mrs. Harris, but this is her house. Will you come in? I suppose Lord Aylmer sent you?"

"Yes, madam," said the stranger, respectfully.

It struck Esther as a little odd that she should use the term "madam," but she put the thought away from her almost as soon as it had taken shape in her mind. "Of course, she is a married woman, and perhaps has never been a servant at all," she said to herself; then said aloud, "Well, come in and see Mrs. Harris. I am sure she will be very glad that you have come. By-the-bye, what is your name?"

"My name is Harris, too, madam," the stranger

answered, with a deprecating look, as it she had rather taken a liberty in having married a man of the name of Harris.

"Dear me, how odd! Well, I suppose my cousin will like to call you by your Christian name. And that is——?"

"Amelia, madam," she answered quietly.

"Oh, yes." Then Esther opened the drawing-room door, and bade Amelia Harris follow her. "Dorothy, here is Lord Aylmer's—— Why, my dear child, what is the matter?" for Dorothy was lying back in her chair with a face as white as chalk and pinched with pain.

"I am so ill," she gasped. "Oh, Esther! Esther!"

Esther took firm ground at once. "Now, don't give way, my dear; all will be well," she asserted. "Here is our help, and we will have the doctor here in next to no time, if you will only tell me where to send for him."

"Dr. Franklin, in Victoria Road," Dorothy answered. "But don't leave me, Esther; don't."

"Certainly not, dearest. Amelia will go and fetch him," Esther returned.

"I had better go at once, madam," said Amelia, quietly.

"Yes, say Mrs. Harris is very ill—that it is urgent."

"Yes, madam," answered Amelia.

She walked off to the Victoria Road at a pretty quick pace, thinking hard as she went. "H'm; from what he told me, he never spoke to her before to-day. Queer. I wonder if he knows about this baby. Shall I wire him, or shall I keep the news as a little

surprise for to-morrow? I'll keep it. The sight of his lordship's face will be worth something."

She knocked at Dr. Franklin's door and asked to see him in exactly the same quiet, self-possessed way that she had spoken to Miss Brand, and all the time her thoughts were running on this new fancy of his lordship's.

"A little sickly-looking girl, little better than a child," she was thinking, as she followed the neat maid into a waiting-room. "Not, I dare say, that she's looking her best just now; but still, what he can fancy in her after a woman like me — but there—— Yes, Sir," she said aloud, "Mrs. Harris has been taken suddenly ill, and Miss Brand wished me to come and fetch you at once."

"Miss Brand?" said the doctor, inquiringly. "Who is she?"

"Mrs. Harris's cousin, Sir."

"Oh! yes, yes. I see. I'll be round in three minutes—in three minutes."

"Very well, Sir."

Amelia Harris went quickly away, her thoughts still with the old lord. "Some women wouldn't do the things he asked of them—the things he asks of me," she said to herself; "and if they promised to, they'd play him false in the end, and be jealous, and all that. Not me, though! Lord Aylmer can do what he likes, and think what he likes, and go where he likes; it's all one to me so long as I'm paid for my trouble. My! he must be in earnest over this business. Five hundred for a month's work—five hundred pounds!"

By that time she had reached the Mansions, and

she went in, took off her bonnet and cloak, and bustled about as only a thoroughly good worker can do, getting ready for the great event which seemed imminent, which indeed was imminent, for by the time morning light shone over London town there were two more inmates of the little flat in Palace Mansions—a stout motherly nurse, who hushed upon her ample bosom a wee fragment of humanity, a very small and soft pinkish person, who had grunted and squalled already in quite an alarming fashion, and who was, as Dorothy fondly told Esther Brand, the very image of his father, dear Dick.

CHAPTER XVII.

MISCHIEF.

AMELIA HARRIS proved herself to be all that Lord Aylmer had said she was—a strong, active, and capable woman, quiet and quick, a good cook, neat in appearance and respectful in manner. She took the orders for the day from Miss Brand, and went off about eleven o'clock to get various things that were wanted, and among other errands she had a telegraph form to hand in at the post-office.

It was from Esther Brand to Richard Harris, and announced briefly but to the point, "Son—both well."

"It will cost a good bit, Amelia," Miss Brand said. "I don't know exactly what, but they will tell you at the post-office. And, by-the-bye, you might bring back a dozen stamps for India. We shall be writing to Mr. Harris by each mail."

"Yes, madam," Amelia Harris answered.

She was a clever woman, that same Amelia, for she went to the office and handed in the telegram, saying, "Will you tell me, please, what that will cost?"

The clerk added it up and told her the amount. "Thank you," she said. "I will tell my mistress."

So did she, but only that the telegram had cost so much, and the money which Miss Brand had given her was short of exactly that sum.

"Oh, not so very much, after all," remarked Miss Brand. "We will send him another wire in a week or so to let him know how they are going on."

"It will be a great relief to the gentleman to know all is satisfactorily over, madam," answered Amelia Harris, in her smoothest voice.

"Oh! yes, indeed," returned Miss Brand.

She went then to sit beside her cousin's bed, to bid her follow the doctor's directions and keep perfectly quiet, as if poor little delicate Dorothy would be likely to do anything else. Then she just told her that she had sent off a wire to Dick, and that as soon as she had put things in trim for lunch, Amelia was going to run down to St. George's Hospital to carry the great news to Barbara.

"Oh, that is good! Barbara will be so anxious," murmured Dorothy in her sweet voice. "And Dick, too, how proud he will be! You'll write at once, Esther, to tell him everything, to tell him how exactly like him the boy is. He will be so pleased."

"I expect he would rather it were like you, dearie," said Esther, smiling.

"Oh! no. But you mustn't call my boy 'it,' Esther," Dorothy declared, "and—and you'll be sure to tell him that Lord Aylmer has been kindness itself to me, won't you?"

"But, my dear, I thought we were not to tell him about Barbara's accident?" Esther exclaimed.

"No—true," and Dorothy for a few minutes lay thinking deeply. Then she turned her eyes back again to her cousin's face. "Oh, I think you may as well tell him; you see, you are here, and the baby is here too. Dick will know that I am in good

hands. I think I would rather that you told him, after all."

"My dear child, take my advice—don't mention the accident or Lord Aylmer at all," Esther urged. "He will worry, and a worrying man is an awful nuisance."

"I don't like deceiving Dick," Dorothy protested.

"No, dear, no; but one could hardly call that deceit," Esther answered. "Anyway, will you leave it to me? I will write on Wednesday morning, and bring you the letter to read."

"Very well, Esther," said Dorothy.

"That is better. Now, if I go away you will rest a little, and I have various odds and ends to do," said Esther, tenderly.

One of her various "odds and ends" was to send Amelia off to St. George's to inform Barbara that the long-expected event had happened, and that a fine bouncing boy, the very image of Dick—of his father, she said—was now flourishing at Palace Mansions. And if the truth be told, Amelia Harris went off on this errand without any great feeling of satisfaction, for just at that moment she particularly wished to remain in the house, having a great desire to be the person to impart the news to Lord Aylmer, when he should care to inquire for Mrs. Harris's welfare.

Of course, she argued with her thoughts as she went up the road, it was just possible that he might wait until after lunch-time, but then, on the other hand, there was not very much going on at this time of year to occupy his lordship, and she was afraid his impatient soul would bring him

to look after his prey as early as he conventionally could.

And Amelia Harris was perfectly right, for just as she was passing the Knightsbridge Barracks on her way citywards, Lord Aylmer's carriage stopped at the door of Palace Mansions. Esther saw it draw up.

"Nurse," she said, going softly into the little dressing-room, where the nurse sat crooning over the baby by the fire, "will you answer the door for me—Amelia has gone? It is Lord Aylmer."

The mere mention of a Lord was sufficient to send the nurse off to the door in a bustle, perhaps the good woman scented a tip in the near future. Anyway, when the door was opened to the great man, he was astonished to see a stout, comfortable-looking body standing smiling and curtseying within. "Yes, my lord—walk this way, my lord," and forthwith she ushered him into the drawing-room, and went back to the dressing-room to relieve Esther of the baby. "A very fine-looking old gentleman, Miss," she remarked.

"Is he?" said Esther. "No, I've never seen him."

Meantime, Lord Aylmer, suspecting nothing of what had happened, was standing at the window watching his horses, his keen and wicked old eyes having noticed during the few moments that he had been in the room that Dick's portrait had gone. He heard the sound of the door opening, and turned to meet, not Dorothy in her flowing blue draperies, with her sweet, shy grey eyes uplifted to his, but a tall dark-eyed young woman in a plain grey gown, who came forward and held out her hand in what was

unmistakably the fashion of a woman who considered herself his social equal.

"Good morning, Lord Aylmer," she said cordially. "I must thank you very much for all your kindness to my little cousin, who is very lonely just now. My name is Brand—Esther Brand."

Lord Aylmer could not help starting a little, but he covered it by a profound bow and a protestation that he was delighted—enchanted, in fact—to have the honour of making Miss Brand's acquaintance.

So this was the Esther of whom she had spoken in her letter — Esther Brand; ay, and likely to prove a brand between him and her. He looked with disgust, and a thousand bad words jostled one another in his heart the while, at Esther's pale, resolute face, her firm, white, capable hands, noted her fearless manner, and admitted that she was unmistakably a woman of education and good breeding. And it is only fair to say that Lord Aylmer positively cursed his ill-luck even while he kept a smooth and smiling front to the enemy.

"And shall I not have the pleasure of seeing Mrs.—er—Harris this morning?" he asked, finding presently that there was no sign of Dorothy's appearance.

Miss Brand laughed. "Well, hardly," she answered. "My cousin is as well as could possibly be expected under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?" Lord Aylmer asked, thinking that Miss Brand was alluding to Barbara's accident.

"The circumstance of a baby," said Esther, smiling.

"Of what? Forgive me, but I do not follow you," he said.

"My cousin has got a baby, Lord Aylmer," said Esther, smiling still more broadly.

Lord Aylmer jumped to his feet. Esther, not a little startled, sprang to hers.

"WHAT?" he cried.

"Mrs. Harris had a little son born at four o'clock this morning," said Esther, who neither understood nor particularly admired this unlooked-for and uncalled-for display of feeling.

"Good God!" burst from the old lord's lips.

For a few moments they stood staring right into one another's eyes, he astounded, disgusted, baffled; she puzzled and a little angry at his unusual and extraordinary behaviour. Of the two, the old lord was the first to recover himself.

"'Pon my soul, my dear lady," he said, with an immense attempt to seem jovial and even amused, "I never was so surprised in all my life before—never. You might have knocked me down with a feather, 'pon my word, you might. A baby—a little son—and I left Mrs. Harris late yesterday afternoon, and hadn't the faintest suspicion that anything of the kind was in the wind."

Miss Brand raised her eyebrows and smiled rather coldly. "That is not very surprising, Lord Aylmer," she observed. "As you never saw my cousin before yesterday, you could not be expected to have suspicions."

"Oh! no, no; but you surprised me so much, er—so very much. And she is well?"

"Oh! yes, thanks; as well as we could possibly wish," Esther answered.

"And not too much upset by the accident to the poor old lady yesterday, I hope?" he inquired tenderly.

"Oh! no. Of course, she was upset at the time, but she was wonderfully calm and quiet after I got here."

"And my valet's wife—Amelia Harris—how does she like her?" he asked.

"Well, really, Lord Aylmer, she hardly knows. Amelia came in, and I had to send her off for the doctor almost before my cousin saw her. But I like her and find her very useful; in fact, we should be but very badly off to-day but for her."

"That is good," Lord Aylmer said with his most fatherly manner.

He felt, this wicked and wily old man, that he would have to be continually on his guard with this steady-eyed young lady. By her advent the difficulties of the situation would be greatly increased; if he succeeded now in ousting Dick and getting hold of Dorothy, it would be in spite of Miss Esther Brand. Yet the difficulties of the situation only made him the more anxious to come off victor in the end, only made him more determined to win Dorothy if possible, whether it were by hook or by crook.

He rose to go then, and held out his hand to his enemy. "I am not only glad but greatly relieved that Mrs. Harris is able to make herself useful, because I feel that I am in a measure responsible for the accident to your cousin's own servant. I

shall be quite anxious to hear how she goes on—your cousin, I mean. I wonder if you would send me a line now and again to Aylmer's Field, near Norwich? I should be so much obliged."

"Oh, certainly I will let you know; it is very good of you to be so interested," Esther answered.

"Ah! that is good of you. I am an old man now, and it is the distressing habit of old people to worry themselves about everything. I shall worry more or less about your cousin until I know she is about again."

"Oh, you mustn't do that," said Esther, laughing. "Then you are going out of town?"

"Yes. I am going to Aylmer's Field for a few days," he replied. "By-the-bye, I shall be charmed to place my carriage at your disposal during my absence—for as long as you like afterwards, for the matter of that," he added.

"That is really very kind of you," said Esther; "but—it seems rather taking an advantage of you."

"Not at all—not the least in the world," put in the old lord quickly. "I will tell them to send round every morning for orders."

He went hastily away after this, chuckling at the success of his visit. "I thought she was going to be difficult," his thoughts ran; "but she's a woman, and, after all, the same baits catch all of them—all of them. There are two things a woman never seems able to resist—diamonds and a really smart turn-out."

He sat still for a few minutes after they turned into the High Street, then called to Charles. "Charles,

drive slowly from here to St. George's Hospital," he said.

"Yes, m' lord," answered Charles.

"Never khoo 'im take such a heap of trouble before," murmured Charles to the coachman.

"Ain't it wonderful?" returned that functionary, with a wink.

The old lord was in luck's way, for just as they reached the corner of the hospital Amelia Harris came out of the big building. She saw him in a moment, and Lord Aylmer called out for the carriage to stop. The carriage drew up close beside the kerb, and Amelia Harris stood quite close to the door, so that not a word of her conversation could be heard by the two stiff and solemn figures who sat with their heads carefully turned away from the wicked old man behind them.

"Well?" he said.

"Well," she said, looking at him in a hard, dry kind of way, "have you been there?"

"Yes."

"H'm—nice little surprise for you, I should fancy."

"Oh, a devil of a surprise," irritably.

Amelia Harris laughed cynically. "Ah, I've been wondering all the morning what you'd think. Well," sharply, "does it make any difference, or are you going on, because if it does——"

"Well?"

"Well, I'll send on this telegram and give her this letter. Poor little fool! she has been worrying about the Indian mail all the morning."

"You will do nothing of the kind—of course I am going on," cried Lord Aylmer sharply, under his

breath. "Give them to me—what are they? There—that will do. Go back—take a cab—and look after my interests as if—this—this—creature had not come at all to interfere with my plans. If anything of importance occurs, write to me at Aylmer's Field. If you need to use the telegraph, be very careful how you word your message."

"On the old plan, I suppose?" she asked.

"Yes; now go. Charles, to my club."

"Yes, m' lord."

Being September, the old lord found his favourite club almost deserted—not that he minded, in fact he wanted the club to himself, and practically he had it. He did not waste time, but read the telegram at once. "Boy—both well," with a sneer, and tore it into a thousand fragments which he flung into the grate. Then he opened the letter, in Dick's well-known writing, bearing the Madras post-mark.

It was a long and tender letter, full of solicitude for her welfare and giving her amusing descriptions of his every-day life.

"Madras isn't much of a place, my darling," Dick said, "but I shall like it well enough when you are out here."

"Good God!" Lord Aylmer cried aloud, "then she means going out to him. So that's your game, is it, my little white cat? Ah! we must see if we can't make a change in that programme."

As he sat there muttering over the letter, an old gentleman, who was peacefully slumbering over the *Morning Post*, started violently and began to make profuse apologies.

"Beg your pardon, I'm sure—afraid I was nodding

over the paper—ten thousand pardons, and—why, it's Aylmer! Bless my soul, Aylmer, are you in town? How do you do?"

"Yes, I am in town—I'm quite well, thank you, and I don't want the paper because I'm reading letters of *great* importance," said Lord Aylmer, rudely and pointedly, and with an utter absence of the delightful fatherly manner which he found so effectual at times.

"Oh! really. Deuced unpleasant letters too, I should think," said the old gentleman, who was a much more important personage than Lord Aylmer, and did not care a snap of the fingers for him.

He got up from the chair where he had been sitting, and waddled off to a somewhat easier one in the big bow-window, where he sat down and began diligently studying the paper, only presently to go fast asleep again with the paper defiantly clasped in his arms. Lord Aylmer went on studying Dick's letter, feeling better for the small passage of words, much as one often feels when a thunder-storm has cleared the atmosphere on a hot summer's day.

"All the same," the letter continued, "I have got most comfortable quarters here, and I have seen a jolly little house about a mile from the town, where I think you will be as happy as possible. I am looking out for a first-rate ayah for you, but really I fancy it will be the easiest if you get an ayah for the child in town—there are always some who have taken children over and want their return passage. You see, my darling, I have not been idle about you, nor forgotten to make the best of my opportunities in gathering information which may make you more

comfortable, though I think sometimes that people must wonder why I want to know about ayahs and nurses."

For a long time Lord Aylmer sat lost in angry thought. So this was the meaning of Dick's sudden surrender, his dutiful acquiescence with his uncle's wishes. There had been no breaking of his chains when he set sail for the East, no burning of his boats behind him. Not a bit of it! No; the young gentleman had quietly—ay, and very cleverly—made the best of what to him was a very bad and very distasteful business, and intended to carry on the Palace Mansions arrangement in Madras just as he had done in London.

But somebody else had to be dealt with, the old lord's grim thoughts ran—somebody else with a brain a good deal shrewder than Dick's, and a will like cold steel. Lord Aylmer would have something to do and say in the matter of Mrs. Harris's intended voyage to India, and he had no notion whatever of allowing his nephew, whom he cordially detested, to carry out all his arrangements in triumph, and in spite of him.

He roused himself presently, and went to the table where writing materials were lying. Then he forced himself to write an ordinary letter to Dick, telling him he was in town for a few days, but was off to Aylmer's Field to-morrow, that my lady was better, and he trusted Dick would bear in mind that he had to reinstate himself in his uncle's good graces that he might get over the disappointment caused by his refusal to marry Mary Annandale, and therefore he trusted he would spare no pains to make himself

indispensable to his old friend, Barry Boynton. And at the end of this meaningless and commonplace letter, Lord Aylmer made an addition, which, like the scorpion's tail, contained the sting:—

"P.S.—By-the-bye, you will be interested to hear that your little friend Mrs. Harris has consoled herself for your absence, without loss of time. I saw her yesterday with a gentleman in an uncommonly well turned out open carriage—splendid horses, smart servants in white liveries, cockades, and all the rest of it. After a long and intimate acquaintance with the world, I have come to the conclusion that soft-eyed little women of that type have marvellous wisdom—they forget the past, give no thought to the future, take the hour as it comes and make the best of it. Sensible creatures!"

And this most dangerous of all lies, the lie which was half a truth, Lord Aylmer dropped into the post-box, and in due time it went speeding over sea and land in place of Esther Brand's telegram, "Boy—both well."

CHAPTER XVIII.

SUSPENSE.

A WHOLE month had gone by and still no word had come from Dick to the anxious heart so fondly waiting for news in Palace Mansions. Or stay, that is not quite correct, for a long letter from Dick had come by each mail, but they had never reached Dorothy, each one of them having fallen in Lord Aylmer's possession.

"I can't make out why your husband has never written, why he never answered the telegram. I think I shall go into the post-office and find out if it really went."

"Amelia said it went," Dorothy replied. She, poor child, had never admitted as much to her cousin, but she was prepared for the worst that could possibly happen. Dick's long silence was beginning to tell upon her, and she was not recovering as quickly as might be desired; indeed, her doctor and her cousin, too, were for the most part thoroughly uneasy about her. And yet, she had now been nearly six weeks without a line from Dick—Dick, who had left her with such fond words of love on his lips —ay, and in his eyes; Dick, who knew that now, of all times, letters would be of greater value than ever they had been, when she was left alone in her hour of trial. Yet he had not written, there was no answer to the telegram announcing the boy's birth,

there had come no word nor sign out of the dark blankness of hope and fear, doubt and despair which was gradually creeping over her.

And, after all, she told herself, it was not to be wondered at if Dick had got a little tired of her—a stupid little thing like her, as ignorant as a child. What was there in her to keep such a man as Dick faithful and true when the width of half the world was stretched between them? And then her eyes fell upon the bangle, which she always wore upon her left wrist, with its bright beacon of hope and trust, Dick's last message to her—"Dinna Forget." No, nothing should make her doubt him; he was overworked, ill, something had happened to keep him from writing.

"Don't worry about it, dear Esther," she said bravely. "Dick would not leave me without a letter without some good reason for it. Please don't doubt him; you don't know how good and kind and thoughtful he is, you don't indeed, Esther."

"No, I don't," said Esther, drily; then with an outburst of tenderness very rare in one of her serene and composed nature, she cried, "Oh, don't look at me in that reproachful way, darling. I want to believe this Dick of yours perfect—I do, dear. But when we go on day after day, week after week, and I see your anxious eyes, see your face getting whiter and whiter—why, I can't help feeling angry at times, and suspicious, and—and as if I should like to kill somebody," she ended passionately.

Dorothy did not speak for a long time, but sat tracing the words on her bangle with a very thin and fragile-looking finger.

"I know what you must think," she said at last. "And I know what Dick's silence must seem to you; but I promised to trust him whatever happens, and I always will. He gave me this the very last of all," she cried, holding out her wrist—oh! so much too small for the pretty bangle now—towards her cousin, "and he gave it as a token between us: 'Dinna Forget.' I know it will be all right by-and-bye, Esther, I know it will; but wait a little longer, before you condemn him, just a little longer."

The piteous appeal went straight to Esther's heart. "Well, I won't mention him again, Dorothy dear, not for another month. We will talk about other things. Are you going for a drive to-day? The carriage will be here at three o'clock."

"Just as you please, dear," Dorothy answered listlessly.

"I think you ought to go. It is good for you, and good for the boy too, and of course you won't have a carriage—at least, not such a carriage—always."

"No," said Dorothy.

Esther was busy making a wonderful bonnet for the wonderful boy, and she pinned in several folds of lace and tried several effects before she spoke again. "Isn't it odd," she remarked at last, "that Lord Aylmer has left his carriage and horses and servants in town all this time, when he is away?"

"Perhaps he never takes them out of town," suggested Dorothy.

"Perhaps not. Any way, it is very pleasant for us as it is," Esther replied. "Well, I shall go and get ready," and gathering up her bonnet and materials, she went out of the room, leaving Dorothy alone.

Almost immediately Amelia Harris came in, bringing a bag filled with little vases of fresh flowers. "Oh!" said Dorothy, "those are the flowers from Aylmer's Field. They are lovely. Is it a pretty place, Amelia? I suppose you have often been there."

"Yes, madam; I have been there once or twice," Amelia replied.

"It is a fine place, is it not?" Dorothy asked.

"A very grand place, madam," said Amelia, apparently giving all her attention to the flower vases.

"And Lady Aylmer—what is she like? Is she nice—handsome?"

"My lady is very handsome, madam," said Amelia, putting the last vase in its place, and coming to put a fold of the window curtain straight. "Very haughty and hard-like, but very handsome for all that."

"Ah!"

Dorothy sat in silence for a minute or two. Amelia Harris began to tidy the little table between the window and the fireplace.

"It seems such a pity that——" Dorothy began, intending to say, "such a pity that Lord and Lady Aylmer did not get on well together." Then she broke off short, suddenly remembering that it would not do to speak of Lord Aylmer's private affairs to his valet's wife, and also that she was not supposed to know more of them than Lord Aylmer himself would be likely to tell so new an acquaintance as she was. Amelia was looking at her with an expectant expression, and Dorothy made haste to finish her sentence.

"It seems such a pity that Lord Aylmer has no heir," she said confusedly.

Amelia Harris not unnaturally, perhaps, misunderstood her.

"Lord Aylmer has an heir, madam," she said quickly, thinking that Mrs. Harris was giving a keen eye to the future. "His nephew, Mr. Richard Aylmer, is the heir—he is in India."

"Ah! yes, really," said Dorothy. She felt very sick and faint as she leant back among the cushions. Amelia Harris thought she was disappointed, whereas, in truth, Dorothy was only nervous and upset at the sudden mention of her husband's name.

"Mr. Aylmer," Amelia continued, "is in the army—in the 40th Dragoons. A handsome young gentleman, but wild—very wild."

Dorothy got up. "Yes, I dare say, but I ought not to talk about him," she said, her voice trembling, and her eyes misty with tears. "I must go and dress for our drive."

She was sobbing passionately by the time she got into her own room. "Dick, Dick," she cried passionately, "it is hard to have to deny you like this, for it was denying you, though I said nothing. Why are you leaving me to fight my way through all these difficulties alone? I won't believe that you are false to me—not until you tell me so; but if it is so, you ought to tell me, you ought to tell me!"

She was sobbing passionately, and the scalding tears ran down her poor pale face and over her little cold hands. They recalled her to herself. "No, I will be brave, I won't doubt you, my darling. There is

something I don't understand. I will wait a little longer."

She unlocked a drawer in her wardrobe and took out the large picture of Dick which she had hidden out of Lord Aylmer's way. "My love, my dear love, I will trust you and believe you," she murmured fondly. "I will not give way again—I will be brave."

She heard the carriage draw up with the usual jingle and dash, and hastily locked the portrait away again. Then she bathed her face in cold water, and tried to remove the, alas! unmistakable signs of tears from her eyes. Not very successfully, though she went out immediately afterwards, walked into the drawing-room, and found there—Lord Aylmer.

"Lord Aylmer!" she cried, then went quickly across the room to him, "Oh! I am so very glad to see you," she cried, "I did not know you were in town.

"I came up last night, dear lady," he said, taking both her hands in his and speaking in a very soft and tender voice. "But you are ill, you are not recovered, you are unhappy about something."

"I?" murmured Dorothy, evasively. "Oh! I am not so very well—but——"

"But you have been crying," said Lord Aylmer, still keeping her hands in his.

"Perhaps," Dorothy admitted.

"Perhaps—I am sure of it," he returned. "But what is the matter? If there is anything that I can do, you know that you have only to command me."

He laid stress on the words *you know*, which in any other circumstances would have been enough to put

Dorothy on her guard. Now, however, with her thoughts filled with Dick and his strange and inexplicable silence, she did not notice the unusual tone. "Oh!" she cried impulsively, "there is something you could do for me if you would."

"What?" he said eagerly. "Tell me."

But Dorothy did not tell him. She wanted to say, "I am Dick's wife, I am so wretched and so unhappy at his absence. Let him come home, and I will love and reverence you for ever."

That was what she wanted to say; but when she was face to face with the opportunity, her courage failed her, and she was afraid.

"Tell me," he said persuasively.

"No—not now—some day, perhaps," she answered.

"You shall tell [me now," said Lord Aylmer, steadily.

He looked so handsome and so determined that possibly in another moment Dorothy would have given in and the mischief would have been out, but fortunately at that moment Esther Brand came in.

"Oh! is that you, Lord Aylmer?" she said pleasantly.

Lord Aylmer dropped Dorothy's hands with an inward curse; but he turned to greet Miss Brand with his blandest smile and most amicable voice. So the opportunity was lost for that day.

"May I join you in your drive?" he said, after a few minutes.

"Why, surely; it is your carriage," answered Dorothy.

"Whenever you care to use it, it is yours," said Lord Aylmer gallantly.

So it happened that the two ladies and Lord Aylmer went for a drive together. And whilst they were driving along Kensington Gore, a young man who was walking with a lady and a little girl, recognised Lord Aylmer, and lifted his hat. Lord Aylmer looked annoyed, but he had no other choice than to raise his hat in return.

"Who is that?" asked Esther.

"Oh, some young man or other—I really cannot tell you," he answered.

And Dorothy sat back in the carriage not feeling sorry that the young man had recognised Lord Aylmer, because in the lady walking beside him, she recognised the lady with the cold serene eyes who occupied the flat above her own. But Esther, who had a dumb and indefinable sense of something wrong, and had seen the look of intense annoyance on his face, chose that moment, of all others, to ask Lord Aylmer the one question which, though she did not know it, was the most awkward of any that she could have asked him.

"Is Lady Aylmer in town?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes." He was positively surprised into making the admission.

"Oh! then I suppose she will be calling on my cousin before long?"

Esther scarcely put the remark in the form of a question, and yet it was a question. Lord Aylmer found himself in the face of a difficulty for which he was not prepared. Yet he made haste to answer, for Dorothy's cousin was emphatically a young woman who could not be ignored. "I do not think I can answer for Lady Aylmer in that respect," he

said, with his most punctilious air. "She and I do not in any way live the same life, do not visit in the same society, except so much as is unavoidable at Aylmer's Field. In fact, we do not get on very well together—more is the pity—and she goes her way and I go mine, without one in any way trying to influence the other. It is just possible that Lady Aylmer may call on Mrs. Harris; but, again, it is exceedingly probable that nothing would induce her to do so. Really, I cannot answer for her one way or the other."

"Oh! I see. What a pity it is," said Esther, quietly.

"Dorothy, my dear," she remarked casually to her cousin when they had reached home and were enjoying a cup of tea, "I don't like Lord Aylmer; he is horrid."

"Oh! Esther, and he has been *so* kind!" Dorothy cried.

"Yes, I know; so kind that one wonders why he takes such a lot of trouble. But his very kindness makes me think of a nasty medicine covered up with syrup—you taste the syrup first and you get the full flavour of the nasty medicine presently, and it tastes all the worse and nastier for the syrup."

"Why, Esther, that was just what——" But there Dorothy broke off short, remembering that Esther did not know Dick's identity.

"Just what who said?" Esther asked.

"I did not say anybody said anything," returned Dorothy, sharply; "but something of the same thought occurred to me once before. Still, he has been kindness itself, and I know that I was once unjust and wrong about him."

"No, Dorothy, my child; he's a wicked old man, and I don't believe he's your friend at all," said Esther, impressively. "I feel as if he might be very dangerous to you, and I shall stay with you until this mystery about your husband is cleared up one way or the other."

Dorothy heard some tone of her cousin's voice which set her nerves quivering. "Esther, dear, it will be cleared up."

"Yes, yes, dear," said Esther, soothingly.

But, all the same, she had little faith of that. She had set herself to try and find Richard Harris out, and she had found that there was not an officer of that name quartered at Madras. Dorothy had spoken of a good appointment and of Dick as a soldier; but there was no trace of him to be found. Out of a desire to spare her cousin until she was stronger, Esther kept this to herself, but her faith in a happy ending to all this mystery was very, very small.

CHAPTER XIX.

LIGHT IN DARKNESS.

IN a veranda of the Government House at Madras, Dick Aylmer sat smoking—smoking and brooding over the inexplicable tangle which we call life.

He had now been three months without one word from Dorothy. He did not know if the child had been born or not, if mother or child were living or dead, if Dorothy, his dear little wife, were false or true. He had heard from her once after reaching India, when she had written in good spirits and with many words of love for him, and in fondest anticipation of their meeting in a few months' time.

But after that letter there had been utter silence. He had written every week, he had telegraphed several times, and to-day the mail was in again, and there was still no news. He had three or four letters of no importance on the chair beside him, and the English papers, but nothing from her. He had had news of her—oh! yes—the news contained in that postscript of Lord Aylmer's letter, and he had dismissed that from his mind at once as an ill-natured lie, and for a week or two he had scarcely troubled himself about it. Yet as the weeks crept heavily by, each week bringing fresh disappointment, that letter came back to his thoughts

over and over again. Could it be possible that his little girl—oh! no, no—nothing should make him believe it, nothing, nothing.

And yet, why did she not write? She must be at Palace Mansions yet, because his letters had never been returned, nor yet his telegrams. Once or twice he had thought of writing to the landlord, or rather the office at which he had taken the flat, but he shrank from doing that, because he might be casting a slur upon Dorothy's fair name, which she would never be able to shake off.

No, that course would not do. He had thought and thought, he had turned it all over in his mind, and, excepting the idea of writing to a private detective and putting the case in his hands, he could think of no way of solving the mystery.

While he was sitting there brooding over his thoughts, a young man dressed in white garments came through a doorway behind him, and pulled up a big chair a little nearer to Dick's, in which he carefully disposed himself.

"Really, Dick," he remarked, "I don't call this half a bad place. Not so jolly as London, of course, but still not half bad."

"I hate it," answered Dick shortly.

The other, fresh from home, looked at him with amused pity. "Poor old chap! like Town better. Yes, of course. Why did you come out, then, eh? You got the post that was meant for me."

"Lord Aylmer got the appointment and I had to come—I had no choice. I shouldn't be here if I had, you may be sure," Dick answered.

"Ah! Lord Aylmer. Queer old chap, eh?"

"Awful old brute," said Dick with a sigh; "but he happens for the present to be the ruler of my fortunes, and a thorough-going old martinet he is too."

"Ah! I saw him the other day."

Dick looked up with some interest. "Did you, though? In Town?"

"Yes."

Now, Town to Dick meant where Dorothy was, and for half an instant he had a wild idea that this man might be able to give him news of her. It died almost in its birth, however, and he said indifferently enough, "Were you in town long?"

"A fortnight altogether. My sister lives in town, you know."

"No, I didn't—didn't know you had a sister."

"Oh, yes; she's a widow—has a little flat."

"A flat!" Dick pricked up his ears. "Yes. Where?"

"In Kensington. Palace Mansions they're called."

"In Palace Mansions," Dick managed to repeat.

The whole world seemed to be blotting out in a strange and insidious fashion, and it was two or three minutes before Dick came to his full senses again.

"I don't think she ought to live there," Marston went on, not looking at Dick, but attending to his pipe. "Living alone except for the child. You never know what the other people are, don't you know. Now, there's a pretty little woman living in the flat below her——"

"What number is your sister's?" Dick asked in a harsh, strained voice.

"No. 6," Marston answered.

In the flash of an instant Dick had made a wild calculation. Yes, he meant Dorothy by "a pretty little woman." "Well?" he said.

He felt sick and faint and cold; he knew that now he was on the eve of news, and Marston's tone had made him dread to hear it.

Marston, all in ignorance, went on speaking. "Such a pretty girl. I saw her several times—fairish hair and delicate-looking, almost like a lady. Well, she went to live in the flat below my sister's, and was very quiet. Husband came and went. My sister fancied it was a bit suspicious, and was careful to get no acquaintance with her. Well, for some months all went smoothly and quietly enough, then she heard, through her servants, I suppose, that Mrs. Harris's husband had gone off to India, and that she was going out later when the child was born."

"Was there a child?" Dick asked. He was trembling so that he could scarcely force his lips to frame the words.

Marston noticed nothing, but went on with the story. "A child. I don't know if there was one then—there's one now. I've seen it."

Dick sat still by a mighty effort. "Well?" he said.

"Well, only a few days after the poor chap had gone, my sister saw her handed into a smart carriage by an old gentleman—heard the footman call him 'my lord'—pair of high-stepping horses—all in grand style. And now that carriage is *always* there, and who do you think the old gentleman is?"

"How should I know?" answered Dick, who was

going over and over the postscript of his uncle's letter.

"You'll know when I tell you," said Marston with a chuckle; "it was your old uncle, Lord Aylmer."

"Impossible!" Dick burst out.

"Not impossible at all, my dear chap," said Marston coolly. "I saw her driving with him myself, and jolly wretched she looked over it. I must say I pitied the poor devil out here; but I dare say he is having a very good time all the same. Eh? What?" he asked of a native servant, who had noiselessly approached him.

"My lady wishes to speak to you, Sir," said the man, who spoke very good English.

"Oh! all right, I'll come," and Marston went in, leaving poor Dick to fight his battle of pain alone.

So that was it, after all. No, he wouldn't believe it, and yet—yet—how could he help believing it? Marston had told him the plain unvarnished facts, not knowing that Dick Aylmer and Mrs. Harris's husband were one and the same man. So this was why his uncle had suddenly taken a guiding hand in his fortunes—this was why he shipped him off to India, at what might be called a moment's notice. "He had seen my Dorothy and wanted me out of the way, and he got me out of the way, and my darling—but no, no—I will believe nothing—*nothing* until I have seen her."

For half an hour he sat in deep thought, trying to determine what would be the best to do, what would be the best course to take; trying, too, to unravel the rest of the tangle, part of which had been opened out before him. But that was an impossible task for

him without further information, and he began to wonder how he could get home, and how arrange a plausible excuse to Lord Skevversleigh. He must go home, that was certain ; evidently his letters and telegrams had been of no effect, probably they had never reached her at all. Why—perhaps that wicked old savage had found means of stopping them, and in that case Dorothy perhaps was fretting her heart out, wondering why he never wrote—perhaps—well, perhaps the child's birth would be in the papers. In spite of silence and mystery she might, as a last resource, have put that in, in the hope of catching his eye.

He began hurriedly to unfasten the paper lying on the top of the little heap beside him. Ah ! the *Standard*. "Abbington — Bowes—Eade—Duchess of Dreamland—Hingston—" No, there was no little babe called Harris in the short list.

He put down the paper in dire disappointment. Poor Dick ! he was getting so weary of being disappointed that each blow seemed to fall more and more heavily. And then just as he was letting the paper fall to his knee, two words caught his eye—two words—"Dinna Forget." With a great throb at his heart, Dick caught the paper back again. Yes, it was a message from Dorothy, right out of the depths of despair.

"Dinna Forget. To Dick.—This long silence is killing me—why do you not write ? For God's sake put me out of suspense one way or the other. D. A."

For full five minutes Dick never moved, then he reverently took off his hat and thanked God that He had made the way plain at last.

Yet, though the way was plain, it was not an easy one. It would be difficult for him to get away from Madras, and neither letters nor telegrams were evidently of any use, since Dorothy had not received those that he had sent. Decidedly, he must go home, whatever happened he must go home, even if he went the length of sending his papers in and trusting to chance and good fortune to be able to make some sort of a living enough to keep Dorothy and the child. But in any case home he must go, to set his wife's mind at rest, and to force that old sinner on to his knees to sue for the mercy which he would not get.

As soon as Lord Skevversleigh returned to the house, Dick sent to ask if he could see him, and to him he explained something of the position of affairs, ending with, "And I must go home, if it costs me all I have in the world."

Now, it happened that Lord Skevversleigh, though he liked Dick very well, had particularly wished to make Marston his military secretary, and had he been able to refuse his old friend Aylmer, he would certainly have done so. There were, however, certain pages of past history which practically precluded this possibility, but they did not preclude him from allowing Dick to throw up his appointment and betake himself home as soon as he liked; and with the very next steamer Dick said good-bye to India and to Government House, and set sail for his native country, hurrying off the boat at Brindisi and journeying homewards overland, like an avenging spirit with whom the wicked old man who was the head of his house

would have a very hard reckoning and but scant quarter

For always in his heart there was that piteous appeal, "This long silence is killing me—for God's sake put me out of suspense, one way or the other."

CHAPTER XX.

HOME.

BY dint of hard travelling night and day, Dick accomplished his journey home from India in fifteen days—a short time in which to traverse such a distance; but oh, how long it seemed to Dick's anxious heart and feverish imagination! The fast P. and O. boat seemed to be standing still, the passage through the Suez Canal was maddening, although they went straight through, which was as lucky as unusual. Then there was the seemingly endless delays in getting off the steamer and into the train at Brindisi, and when at last they were fairly off, the train seemed to crawl along no faster than the boat. Yet, in spite of all this impatient and vexatious anxiety, Dick made an unusually quick journey home, and in fifteen days from touching at Bombay, he found himself walking along the platform of the Victoria station.

It was hard on the time of Christmas—crowds of people were hurrying to and fro, most of them with that busy and impatient look upon their faces which even the dullest persons generally assume at the approach of the festive season. But Dick did not trouble himself much about them. He had very little luggage to impede him, all his heavy baggage having been left in the steamer to come by sea—in fact, he

had only his ordinary portmanteau and his hat-box, a couple of rugs and his stick, all of these he had with him in the carriage, so that he was almost the first passenger to get his luggage passed.

"Cab, sir?" asked his porter.

"Yes, hansom," Dick answered.

The man shouldered the portmanteau and went off to the cab-rank, Dick following; but he was not destined to reach it without interruption, for as he crossed the less crowded part of the platform, he heard an exclamation of surprise and found himself face to face with Lady Aylmer.

"Dick, Dick, is it you?" she cried, staring at him.

Dick put out his hands to her. "Yes, Lady Aylmer," he said; "I've come back. I'm in trouble —horrid trouble!"

"My dear boy, *how?*" she cried.

Dick looked about him, he was anxious not to waste a moment in getting to Palace Mansions. "You are going away," he said uneasily. "I am keeping you. It is a long story, and I am anxious to get home to my wife."

"Your wife, Dick!" cried Lady Aylmer, opening her eyes wider than ever. "Why—but there, I won't keep you. Come with me, I have the brougham here. I've been seeing Constance Seymour off, she has been staying a few days with me. I will drive you where you like, the cab can bring your luggage."

"That is awfully good of you," said Dick. "I can tell you the whole story as we go along. But first tell me where is he?"

"My lord? In Town," with a significant nod.

"There is somebody, and I don't think he has been successful this time. Something is going on, and his temper is fiendish, and I'm afraid, my dear Dick, he will take your return badly."

"I don't think, Lady Aylmer," answered Dick steadily, "that he will find himself in a position to make any remarks on the subject. Then you don't know what he is after just now?"

"Not in the least. And I don't choose to ask the servants, though I dare say they know all about it," she answered.

"Then," Dick said, "I will tell you. May I close this window? I feel the change of climate a little. Thanks. Well, Lady Aylmer, I have been married more than a year, and he saw my wife, and—and did her the honour to admire her. He sent me out of the way to India, and look at this," opening his pocket-book and showing her a scrap of newspaper. "I have not heard from my wife for more than three months, and then I found this—a pitiful message from her to me. I have written, telegraphed, eaten my very heart out, and he has stopped all communication between us. She is breaking her heart believing that I am false to her—I who live only for her."

"And when you meet my lord—there will be a reckoning," Lady Aylmer said inquiringly.

"Yes," answered Dick, grimly, "there will be a reckoning, and I don't think Lord Aylmer will venture to question me about my return home."

Lady Aylmer drew a long breath. "As to that, my dear boy, time will show. Lord Aylmer is very fertile in excuses and in audacity. He very possibly may coolly turn the tables on you, act the virtuous

uncle, and get the better of you. Be prepared for *anything*."

"He cannot explain intercepted letters and telegrams," cried Dick.

"Lord Aylmer is capable of explaining *anything*," Lady Aylmer answered with conviction.

They very soon reached the road in which Palace Mansions may be found, and as the brougham drew up at the entrance to the building, Lady Aylmer uttered an exclamation of surprise. "My dear boy, you will catch him in the act—that is our carriage."

The servants were huddled up in furs over their gorgeous liveries, but Dick knew them instantly. They, too, recognised Lady Aylmer, and touched their hats.

"Go straight in," she said. "Which are the windows?"

"To the right of the door," Dick answered.

They were scarcely an instant, and Dick felt in his pocket. "I took my latch-key by accident," he whispered. "I little thought I should find it so useful."

The next moment he had opened the door, when Amelia Harris hearing him, came quickly out from the kitchen, and fell back aghast to see her ladyship and my lord's heir, Mr. Aylmer.

"*You* here," said Dick in disgust. "Not one word —at your peril."

"Mr. Aylmer—my lady——" she began, when Lady Aylmer stopped her by a wave of her hand.

"Go back to your kitchen, woman," she said coldly. "Dick, is there any other entrance to this house? No? Then lock that door. We shall require that woman later, probably."

She pointed imperiously to the door out of which Amelia had just come, and there was no choice but obedience. All this had passed in a whisper, and Lady Aylmer said in the same tone to Dick, "Which is the drawing-room?"

"That—the door is not closed."

"Is there a screen?"

"Yes."

"Push it open," she said.

And even as Dick cautiously did so, they heard Lord Aylmer's voice speaking to some one within.

"But, Dorothy, my darling, my dear little love, do you refuse me? Is there nothing I can do to propitiate you?"

"Nothing," Dorothy's sad soft voice replied. "I wish you would go away—I have mistaken you all along. I thought you were so kind and good and fatherly; but I see my mistake now. I suppose I ought to be angry with you, only it seems ridiculous to be angry in that way with an old gentleman like you."

"I am not old, Dorothy. I should always be young if you cared for me," he replied.

"Oh, I dare say," answered Dorothy, indifferently; "but I am married, and I am very miserable."

"Let me make you happy?" he urged.

"Could you give me the moon if I cried for it?" she asked with soft scorn. "Do not talk nonsense, Lord Aylmer. Go home and try to realise that you have mistaken a good woman and a faithful wife for something else; and try to remember, too, that if you persist in your useless attentions, you become my persecutor."

"I shall never give you up," he cried.

"No," said Dorothy wearily, "because you cannot—you cannot give up what you have never had. I am nothing, and have never been anything but a wish to you. I never shall be—never," with a sudden gust of passion. "Not if you stayed on your knees from now till crack of doom."

"And you think I shall take this answer?" he cried furiously.

"I am sure of it," said Dorothy, quietly. "You cannot help yourself. I have no other to give you."

"You think I will leave you—to go dreaming on about the fellow who betrayed you and deserted you, who has left you for months without sign or word, who never even told you his real name, who——"

"Married me," cried Dorothy, goaded into betraying her secret at last. "I am Dick's wife—I shall be Lady Aylmer some day."

"Damnation!" cried the old savage in a fury.

"My boy is your heir, my lord," she cried triumphantly, "so you see how likely, how very likely the other arrangement is."

Then she broke down and began to cry piteously. Dick went a step further into the room.

"Dorothy," said the old lord, "I beg of you not to cry like that. I will do anything, everything to make you happy—I will settle five thousand a year on you," at which Lady Aylmer spread out her hands expressively to Dick, for the old lord had "cried poor" for many and many a year. "What! still no? Dorothy, be reasonable, think! You have compromised yourself with me—I have been here continually—my carriage stands at your door for hours. Dick

will never come back, never—I know him so well; and even if he did, he would *never* believe you against all the evidence which could be brought against you. Why, think of your position now—you are alone in the house with me, except for a woman who is my servant—my tool. Your cousin has gone away for two days, your old servant is away too. At this moment you are absolutely at my mercy."

"Oh! no, no!" Dorothy cried, as if struggling against him.

"At my mercy," went on the wicked sneering voice, "and I have no mercy——"

"*Nor I*," thundered Dick, dashing the screen aside.

He had his uncle by the throat ere Dorothy, in her surprise, could gasp out his name. "You scoundrel! you villain!" he cried, and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat, flinging him backwards on to a lounge.

"My love! my sweetheart!" he cried tenderly, turning to Dorothy. "I got your poor little pitiful message at last. My poor little love, dear little wife, there has been nothing worse between us than that wicked old sinner there."

"Dick! Dick!" was all that she could say.

During this, Lord Aylmer had very carefully and tenderly gathered himself together and got on to his feet, when he cautiously made his way in a blind sort of fashion towards the door

"Not so quickly, my lord," said a voice—one that he knew well, "you have to reckon with *me* now. *I* want to know the meaning of the extraordinary proposals which you made just now to your nephew's

wife! If you can settle five thousand a year upon Mrs. Harris, you can settle it with equal ease upon Mrs. Aylmer, and if you wish to keep this morning's *surprise* a secret, with all its pleasant little additions of evidence, suppressed letters, intercepted telegrams, lies, and dishonour, that is the price which you will pay for the privilege."

She stood looking at him, a commanding, inflexible, haughty presence, secure in her own rectitude and in her marriage-settlements; and for the first time in his life, the savage old lord quailed before her.

"I—I—you've done me, all of you," he muttered indistinctly, "that little jade the cleverest of all. But five thousand a year—I'll be——" there was a long dreadful silence: he caught at his throat with palsied fingers, stared blindly round, and fell backwards on to the lounge again.

Lady Aylmer was the first to reach him. "Take your wife away, Dick. These fits are most distressing to see," she said. "Oh, yes; he has had them before—often. Get me some brandy and water; but keep your wife away."

She went to the window and flung it open. "Charles," she called, "tell Jones to go for the nearest doctor at once, and you come in here. Your lord is in a fit."

"Yes, my lady," said Charles; then added to Barker, "Old codger in a fit. I thought there 'd be a pretty shine-up between my lady and Mrs. Harris, to say nothing of Grosmont Road."

"Ah!" said Barker, wisely, "it was time my lady knew what was a-going on."

Dr. Franklin was soon on the spot, but he only shook his head and said Lord Aylmer had better be got into bed at once. "Very serious. We will try all remedies possible; but I must tell you frankly it is a very grave case."

"Yes, we understand," said Lady Aylmer, calmly. "Perhaps for general satisfaction we had better send off for our own doctor; but you will stay and meet him, of course."

"Certainly, Lady Aylmer. I shall be most happy to do so," he replied.

So Jones was sent off for Sir Fergus Tiffany, and Lady Aylmer rang the bell, which was answered by Amelia Harris, who looked frightened out of her senses.

"Oh! Dresser," said Lady Aylmer, speaking to her by her real name, "I want you. Come here."

"Yes, my lady."

"I always knew that you were a thoroughly unprincipled woman," said the lady coldly, "but I did not think you would descend to stealing letters."

"My lady!"

"Not one word! Lord Aylmer, you see, has had a fit and they are going to get him into bed. If you value your *liberty*," significantly, "you will do what you can to make yourself useful."

"Yes, my lady," meekly, and with an awful fear knocking at her heart that, if she was lucky enough to keep out of prison, Lord Aylmer would die and she would never get a farthing of the money for which she had risked her liberty—money by this time swollen to a thousand pounds.

Truly, a more miserable woman than Amelia

Dresser, otherwise Harris, did not live in London town that day.

"Dick," said Lady Aylmer, walking into the little dining-room, while the doctor, Charles, and Dresser were carrying the unconscious old lord into Dorothy's bedroom, "your wife cannot in any case stop here. Oh, is that the baby? What a love! But tell me, would it not be best for her to take the child to Belgrave Square? I suppose you have a nurse, my dear?"

"Oh, yes. Esther would make me have a nurse," Dorothy answered.

"Then just take what you are likely to want for the night and let the nurse pack up a few things for the child, and take her now, Dick. The carriage is still here. Tell them who she is, of course; and see that they make her comfortable. It is better for her to be out of the way of this."

"I would rather stop, Lady Aylmer," cried Dorothy. "Don't part me from Dick so soon, for he would have to come back here. I will stay in this room. I will keep quite out of the way, indeed I will."

"Very well—very well," said my lady, smiling.

She was very considerate and tender with Dorothy, yet her heart was heavy at the disclosures of the past hour. It was a terrible end even to an unhappy marriage, and Lady Aylmer, remember, had been married for love.

Well, that exciting day dragged itself away. Dorothy would have Dick send off a telegram to Esther and Barbara, announcing his return home. For Barbara had recovered very slowly from her

accident, and having taken a chill, which was followed by an attack of bronchitis, had been peremptorily ordered off to Bournemouth, whither Esther had taken her.

There was so much to tell Dick, so much for Dick to tell her, and they sat almost all the afternoon by the fire talking. And Lady Aylmer kept watch by the bed of him who had lived so wicked a life, and prayed with heart and soul for that mercy which he had never troubled to ask for himself, and could not ask, now that it was too late.

For it was too late! Lord Aylmer never opened his eyes consciously on this world again! For several hours he lay breathing hard, and unconscious of all the remedies applied to him, and of the means by which the doctors tried to arouse him from his stupor. All in vain! The life which might have been a noble one, but which had been given over to all manner of evil, slipped away, and about six o'clock, while Dick and his wife were still sitting by the fire talking, with the lights turned low, Lady Aylmer came gently in. Dick knew in a moment from her manner what had happened.

"Lady Aylmer, is it——?"

And, in answer, Lady Aylmer took Dorothy in her arms and kissed her. "My dear," she said, "you are Lady Aylmer now."

THE END.

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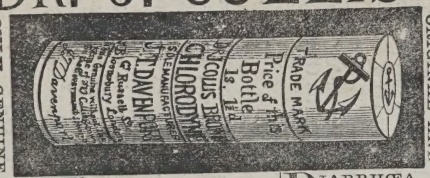

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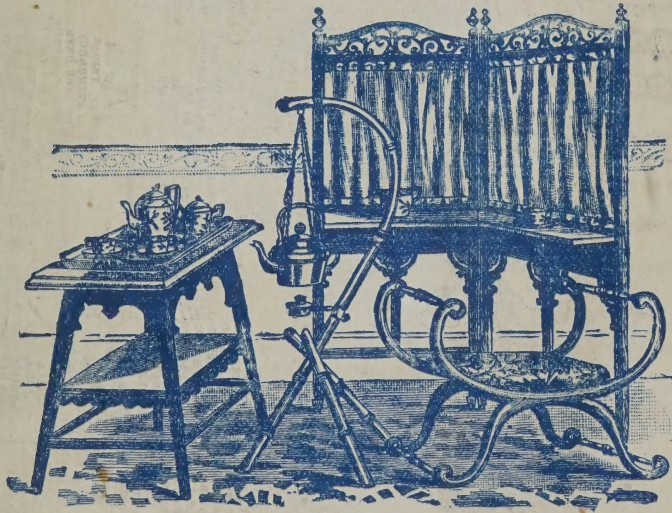

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